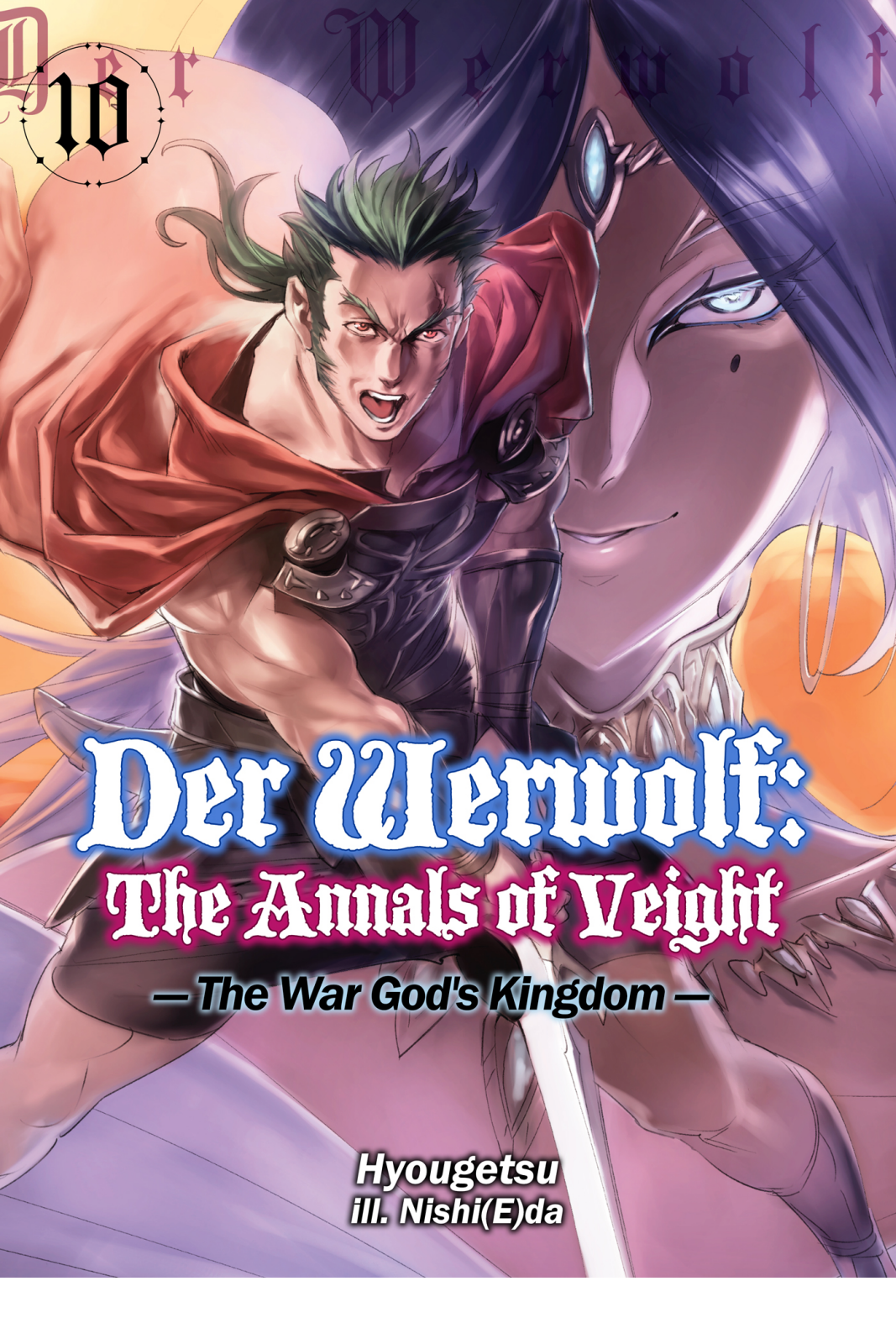


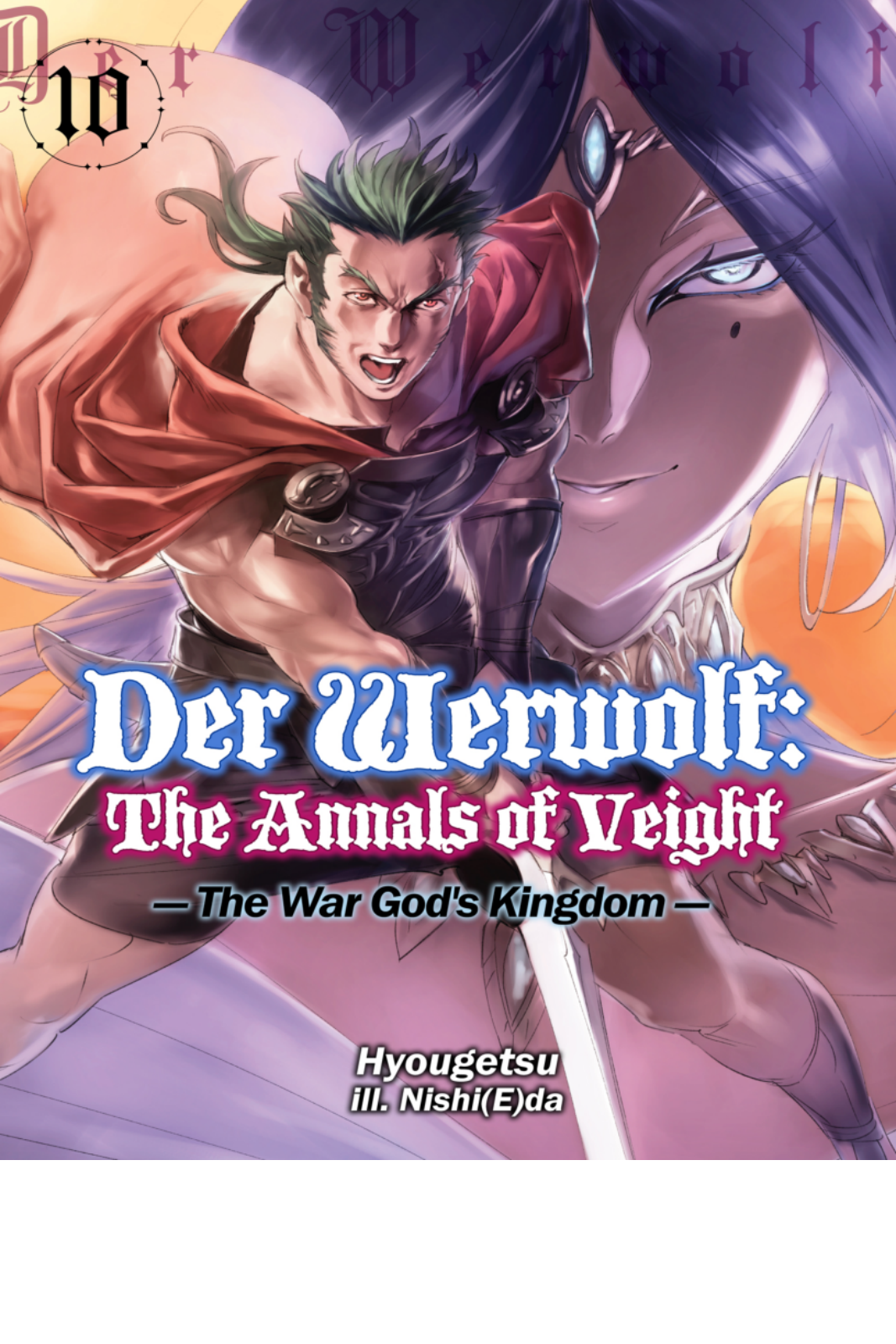


Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight

— The War God's Kingdom —

Hyougetsu
ill. Nishi(E)da





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illustration: Xishi/Elle



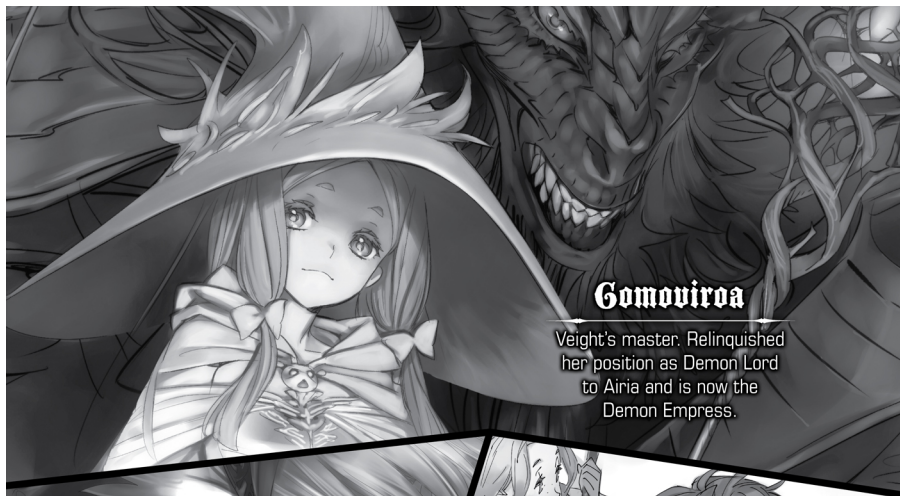
Character

Veight

A former human who's been reborn as a werewolf. Now serves as the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, and is also a member of the Southern Commonwealth.

Airia Lutte Aindorf

The beautiful Viceroy of Ryunheit and now Meraldia's Demon Lord.



Gomoviroa

Veight's master. Relinquished her position as Demon Lord to Airia and is now the Demon Empress.



Parker

An undead skeleton who studies under Gomoviroa with Veight. He used to be human.



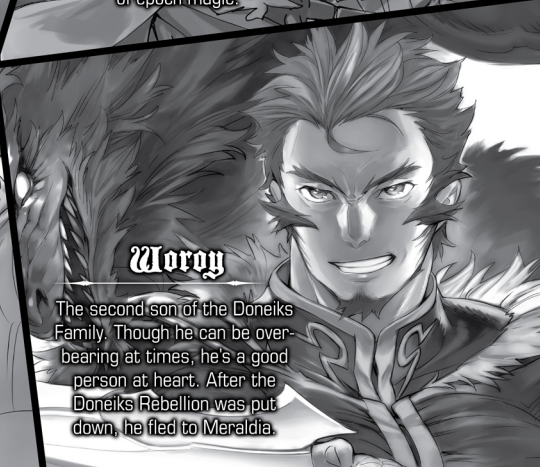
Kite

Originally worked for the Senate, but after meeting with Veight became his Vice-Commander. A master of epoch magic.



Ryunnie

Woroy's nephew. He is currently touring the various cities in Meraldia and learning from their best tutors.



Woroy

The second son of the Doneiks Family. Though he can be overbearing at times, he's a good person at heart. After the Doneiks Rebellion was put down, he fled to Meraldia.



The story so far

While Veight was out investigating the forest with Gomoviroa, Airia dispatched a team to a northern mine where strange sightings have occurred. With a search party in tow, Kite headed off to investigate the situation. There, he found the culprit: an animated skeleton holding a powerful magical goblet and commanding an army of undead.

The mass of undead began advancing on Ryunheit's cities, but Veight returned just in time to save the day. The demon army started looking further into the goblet that started this whole mess, but it ended up taking over Airia's body next!

By reading her memories, it managed to copy her mannerisms to an unnerving degree, fooling almost everyone. But Veight, able to notice the subtle differences, started interrogating the goblet to discern its true intentions. It appeared that the seemingly normal-looking chalice was attempting to fulfill the mission it was created for—creating new Heroes—and it spirited Airia away.

Determined to save her, Veight decided to appease the goblet by supplying the mana it was trying to procure. Taking Ason's Legendary Treasure from the Wa delegation sent to guard it, he transferred all of its mana into Airia. Though she now had enough power to be a Hero, she chose to become a Demon Lord instead.

Once everything was settled, the two of them confessed their feelings for each other and officially became a couple. Shortly thereafter, Gomoviroa officially bequeathed the title of Demon Lord to Airia, and Veight became her new Vice-Commander. The two were wed, and Meraldia entered a new era of peace and prosperity.

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C o n t e n t s

Chapter 10

◆ ◆ ◆

***** Extra Story *****

◆ ◆ ◆

Inherited Wills

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D e r

W e



Chapter 10

I was reincarnated as a werewolf, became the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, and transformed Meraldia into a nation where humans and demons could live together in harmony. I thought things would calm down after that, but then one of the dead Senators came back as a lich using the power of Draulight's Legacy, a magical artifact designed to create Heroes. Once we stopped him, the artifact hijacked Airia's body, and after a long series of events she ended up becoming the demon army's third Demon Lord.

Incidentally, our new Demon Lord is sleeping next to me right now. I got married to her the other day, and now my boss is also my wife.

"What time is it?" I muttered sleepily.

There was something deeply comforting about waking up next to someone. The autumn chill had set in, but because Airia and I slept in the same bed, the nights were never cold. Honestly, I thought I'd be too nervous to get any rest when we first started sleeping together, but I got used to it surprisingly quickly. Now there was nothing more relaxing than falling asleep nestled in her warm embrace. Airia likely felt the same way, since she also nuzzled against me when we slept. The past few days, we always woke up in each other's arms.

Last night I'd gone to bed with my head resting in Airia's chest, but our positions had reversed some time during the night and now it was Airia who was using me as a pillow. She was sleeping so peacefully that I felt like it would be wrong to wake her up. But the sun was out, and if I didn't do it soon, one of the maids would wake her up instead.

Once Airia was up, we went down to eat breakfast. As we ate, we discussed our plans for the day. I was her assistant, so she needed to be aware of my schedule.

"Beluza's warriors got into a fight with some of Lotz's soldiers at a bar last night," I muttered as I read over the daily report Wengen had sent me. A fight between groups like this wasn't something we could afford to brush off. If we didn't address the issue quickly, it could escalate into a dispute between the two cities. It was best if we nipped this problem in the bud.

“I’ll go mediate. This isn’t something the Demon Lord needs to trouble herself with.”

“Try not to scare them, okay?” Airia replied with a worried look, and I smiled ruefully.

“Do I really terrify people that badly?”

“You’re Meraldia’s most famous general. People are more scared of you than you think.”

Maybe I should go for a less direct approach, then.

“I see... In that case, how about I discuss things with the captains of both squadrons instead of disciplining the soldiers myself?”

“That’s a much better idea. If you handled the issue personally, it would become a bigger deal than it needs to be.”

Really? Do my actions have that much of an impact? If every little thing I did had such dire repercussions, I needed to pass off yet more of my responsibilities onto other people. *I wish I still had Kite.* Sadly, he’d be mad with me if I brought on another vice-commander, so I had no choice but to divvy up tasks between a large group.

“We really need to hurry and train a new generation of skilled bureaucrats.”

“Indeed. It’s impossible for us to keep track of developments in all seventeen cities by ourselves. Taking care of our duties is hard enough as it is.”

Life was a lot easier when all I had to worry about was the demon army. Meraldia was simply too large for us to manage on our own; we needed to find people we could trust to pick up some of the slack.

“There’s so much to do that we can’t even take any time off,” I grumbled.

Airia chuckled and replied, “But you like being busy, don’t you?”

I won’t deny that. Maybe I would be able to take it easier in the future, but right now, I had plenty of work on my plate. My hardest job was making sure everyone got along. There were so many disputes between humans and demons, northerners and southerners, and Sonnenlicht believers and Mondstrahl adherents. Everyone had their own circumstances which led to conflict, and resolving those conflicts was never easy. Fortunately, I was friends with the leaders of every influential organization, but they had responsibilities to their people as well, and just because we were friends didn’t mean they’d always listen to my requests. Of course, these disputes were hardly anything new, but I wished people weren’t so eager to leap at each other’s throats.

Making a human viceroy the new Demon Lord had gone a long way towards easing tensions, at least. Both humans and demons were willing to respect her as the ultimate authority in Meraldia.

“Airia, do you want another egg?”

“Where did that come from?”

“You need to eat more if you want to keep your strength up.”

I was basically a cross between Airia’s personal manager and her representative. If two incidents that required the Demon Lord’s attention popped up at the same time, it was my job to take care of one of them. My most important duty, though, was filtering out the requests that came her way. Halfway through my morning paperwork, a situation came up where I had to do just that.

“...A petition for the Demon Lord, huh?”

I looked down at the document that had come from across the sea. Garsh had delivered it personally.

“The guy knew Petore’d just shut him down so he came crying to me and asked if I could deliver it.”

Petore was too hardened a merchant to be moved by tears. Meanwhile, Garsh put up a tough guy act, but he was a big softie inside. Naturally, this meant all merchants brought their issues to the council through him, rather than through Petore. This particular petition had come from one of the nations in the continent south of the Sea of Solitude, Kuwol. Geographically, Meraldia lay around where Italy or Spain did back on earth, so the southern continent had a climate similar to Africa’s northern coast. Much like the ancient empires that had ruled northern Africa, the kingdom of Kuwol was a maritime nation. It was a longtime trading partner of Beluza and Lotz, and it was more of a confederation of powerful tribes than a true kingdom. Most of the citizens were Mondstrahlists, which was partly why there was no real central authority. The Mondstrahl religion valued freedom over cohesion, after all.

“If it’s a letter from the king himself, we probably can’t hand this off to anyone else.”

Petore had balls for turning down a royal envoy, but he probably knew Meraldia was safe from retribution since it was so far from the southern continent. No nation would profit from a potential invasion of Meraldia, no matter how powerful they were. Of course, Petore must have known the envoy would head to Beluza when he turned the man away. Chances were, he didn’t actually want to keep the royal envoy out, he just didn’t want to deal with the hassle of escorting him. *What a crafty old man he is.*

Reading over the petition, it appeared that Kuwol wanted Meraldia’s help in patrolling its lands. The king was feuding with the nobles who held land along the coast, and the nation was on the brink of civil war. Apparently, the king had raised taxes on port towns in an attempt to fill his empty coffers, which had angered the coastal nobles and the merchant guilds. Incidentally, the reason the king’s coffers were empty was because he’d spent too much money on a new palace.

After I finished reading the letter, I sighed. "This nation's king is a moron. Even a child knows not to spend more money than you have."

"Yeah. The old geezer said the same thing." Garsh folded his arms and nodded thoughtfully. "No way an imbecile who can't keep his country's merchants happy will have a deal worth a damn. I ain't dealing with him."

You're really good at imitating Petore's voice, you know that? Putting Kuwol in our debt would definitely be a boon for Meraldia, but there was no point in doing any favors for a foolish king like that. There were plenty of neighboring tribes that were allied with Kuwol, but from the looks of things, they weren't lifting a finger to help this guy either. He'd already been abandoned by his closest allies, so it made little sense for us to aid him.

"Besides, he didn't even send anyone over to forge diplomatic ties when we went from a Federation to a Commonwealth but now he's coming to us crying for help?"

Scowling, Garsh nodded in agreement. "You said it. He kept turning our messengers away before, but now that he's in trouble, he's suddenly acting all friendly."

"He probably changed his tune because the new Demon Lord is a human. Plus, she's kind, wise, beautiful, and..."

Wait, what was I getting at here?

"Err, sorry for rambling. The point is, he probably thinks he'll have an easier time dealing with Airia than with Master. What an opportunist."

"Y-Yeah," Garsh replied absentmindedly.

"What I don't get is why ask Meraldia of all places for help?"

He shrugged his shoulders and said, "My guess is he heard that a certain *someone* went to Rolmund and replaced the emperor with a new empress that was pro-Meraldia."

"That story has spread to other continents?"

"Well, yeah. Every Meraldian sailor has probably boasted about it in every port they've visited. You're a legend, Veight."

Oh god, please no. Anyway, all the merchant and sailor's guilds in Kuwol are probably against the king, and they've got the backing of the local nobles. Those noble families possessed centuries-old ties to Beluza and Lotz. They were valuable trading partners as well, so it was hardly surprising that Petore had dismissed the king's messenger. Honestly, if I had to choose, I'd say I was on the nobles' and merchants' side too. Who would help a king who wasted all his money on a new palace?

"That being said, we can't just ignore a letter from a king. I'll show it to Airia and we can decide what to do at the next council meeting. If you want, I can deal directly with the envoy from now on, too."

“I’d love that, but are you sure?”

“Yeah. Chances are, if we drag our feet long enough, Kuwol will break out into civil war. On the off-chance it doesn’t, it would mean the king doesn’t need our help, so we win out either way.”

I realized this was a callous decision, but I didn’t want to commit any of Meraldia’s troops to Kuwol. There was no need for Meraldian blood to be spilled over another nation’s internal dispute. Also, I was scared of public opinion turning against the council if we sent soldiers abroad.

* * * *

—The Boss’ Worries—

“Man, why does everyone always come to me with their shitty problems?” Garsh muttered with a sigh and scratched his beard.

He hadn’t told Veight, but he was actually good friends with a number of Kuwol’s viceroys. The viceroy of Bahza, one of Kuwol’s largest cities, had saved Garsh’s father’s life. Petore owed him a great debt as well. Not only that, but he’d offered favorable trading terms to Petore and Garsh, so they really couldn’t afford to alienate him. At the same time, Garsh hadn’t had the heart to turn away the king’s messengers. They’d just looked so desperate.

Thank god Veight’s a good guy. He’s the only one who understands how goddamn hard it is to try and please everyone. Had the demon army been as evil as humans initially believed them to be, Garsh probably would have died of stress by now. Fortunately, Veight was more reasonable than most humans, and while he wasn’t technically the Demon Lord, he was in all practical terms the leader of the demon army. The only reason humans and demons weren’t trying to kill each other was because of him. *Still, I can’t be relying on Veight for everything. The guy’s got enough on his plate as it is. Plus, he just got married. He should be able to enjoy life for a little bit, at least.*

Garsh recalled Veight’s delighted expression when he’d been gushing about Airia. It was hard to believe the man who used to think about nothing but work could look so happy. *Sorry for passing my burdens onto you, Veight.* Garsh sighed and scratched his head. At the very least, he fulfilled his obligation to Kuwol’s royal family. All he’d done was deliver a letter, so the nobles he had ties with probably wouldn’t see this as a betrayal.

He turned back to the door to Veight’s office and smiled wanly. “I just hope old man Petore doesn’t blow his top over this—for both our sakes.”

* * * *

Kuwol's king sent multiple follow-up letters, but each time I deflected by saying things like "We don't have enough transport ships," or "We're in the middle of restructuring our army and don't have troops to spare." Technically neither of those were lies, though they were embellishments of the truth. We had so few transport ships that we could only send 100 to 200 soldiers over at best. Most of Meraldia's fleet consisted of thick-hulled, speedy galleys designed to patrol the coast. They were hard to sink and suited for close-quarters combat, but they couldn't hold much cargo. We *could* requisition cargo ships from wealthy merchants, but it would cost an arm and a leg. It simply wasn't worth sticking our neck out for Kuwol's king.

However, I did order Lotz and Beluza to proactively gather information so we'd be ready in case of a regime change. Since Wa was our ally, I also told Fumino everything we'd learned about Kuwol's current situation. I decided to start studying Kuwolese though, just in case.

It was possible the fallout from Kuwol's civil war would reach Meraldia, so I made reorganizing the army a top priority. Under the Senate, the structure of Meraldia's army had been an absolute mess. Noble knights, commissioned officers, rank-and-file soldiers, and private mercenaries all had different command structures that overlapped with each other in confusing ways. Untangling that mess was impossible, so I decided to consolidate all the branches under the direct control of the council.

Knights would make up the backbone of Meraldia's new army. Since knights were all nobles, they didn't know any trades or how to farm, which meant that if we didn't keep them on as soldiers, they'd become unemployed. On the flip side, they were educated and knew a ton about warfare, so they made for perfect commanders; especially since they adhered strictly to their chivalric code, whereas most mercenaries were hardly better than bandits.

I gathered all of Meraldia's knights and began my speech.

"Noble sirs, both the council and the demon army have heard many tales of your loyalty and valor. When we were still enemies on the battlefield, you were our fiercest opponents."

I was telling the truth, so I didn't feel bad about laying the praise on a little thick. Their morale hadn't flagged even when it was clear the Senate was done for, their equipment and training were top-class, and they were all in good shape. Had the Senate not utilized the knights so poorly, the demon army would have struggled to overcome them.

"At present, you answer only to the council. However, the ruler of Meraldia is the Demon Lord, and she needs a personal army."

In the past, Woroy had impressed upon me the importance of forming a unit that answered only to the nation's highest authority. At present, all of Meraldia's soldiers were under the council's jurisdiction. That meant they couldn't be mobilized without a majority vote. On the other hand, the demon army answered only to the Demon Lord, but it contained only demons, and wasn't suited for peacekeeping expeditions to other countries. I was worried about what was going on in Kuwol, and I needed a force that I could send to keep an eye on things. That force needed to be adaptable, independent, and composed of elites.

"I was thinking the best way to remedy this would be to incorporate human soldiers into the demon army. The demon army's primary goal is to protect everyone living in Meraldia—both human and demon. That means, even if you transfer to the demon army, your primary job won't change."

I tried to make the proposition sound as appealing as possible, but I could tell from their scent that they were still nervous. *I'm going to have to choose my words carefully here.*

"Our current Demon Lord is the Demon Ambassador Airia. Those of you who have spent time in Ryunheit know that she is a leader you can trust." The knights' expressions relaxed a little. The nervousness vanished from their scent as well. I cleared my throat and added, "Those of you who choose to join us shall be called 'Demon Knights,' to differentiate you from the council's order of knights."

"Demon Knights..." one of the knights murmured.

I knew this would hook them. Weird as it was, medieval knights were kind of like pro sports teams in that they valued titles and fame a great deal. It made sense, since the more achievements a knight had, the greater their salary. They weren't chasing after fame and honor just for the heck of it; their families' livelihoods depended on them distinguishing themselves. That was why a fancy new title like "Demon Knight" made for the perfect bait.

"The Demon Knights will be a new, elite corps of soldiers who are skilled at coordinating with demon troops. This is a task of which only veteran knights such as yourselves are capable."

The knights nodded in unison. They had pride in their abilities as career soldiers. All of them had been raised to fight since early childhood. In this world, soldiers who were educated, understood tactics and strategy, and actually obeyed the law were a rare commodity.

"Moreover, as the Demon Knights will be a unit under the direct command of the Demon Lord, they will be given the most dangerous missions. Inexperienced warriors will not live long in this unit. However, I'm sure that hardened veterans such as yourselves will be

able to complete even difficult missions with ease.”

I was trying to make it sound like I was inviting them to an elite, exclusive club.

“Naturally, you will be rewarded handsomely for placing yourselves in such danger. Not only will your salary be increased, but the demon army shall also pay for your equipment and its maintenance. Anything you want, you can have.”

That was an extremely important perk for guys like these.

“That’s not all, either. If you are injured in the line of duty, the demon army shall pay you a yearly pension to compensate. And if you die, that pension shall be paid to your family for a duration of thirty years. Lastly, you will be granted a plot of land for every ten years of service.”

No other nation treated its soldiers this well. The reason we could afford to cover all these expenses was because trade with Wa had enriched Meraldia considerably. A country was only as good as its people, which was why I wanted to make sure Meraldia’s people were given proper care. *Alright, time for the finisher.*

I frowned sternly and said, “However, this post is not for the faint of heart. If you’re afraid for your life, you need not apply.”

I sighed and shook my head.

“The demon army only wants the most fearless of warriors. I won’t force any of you to join the Demon Knights. Of course, I realize this is a lot to take in at once, so you have until spring to decide what you want to do.”

An elderly knight stepped forward.

“If you’re looking for fearless warriors, sir, you’ve found them. Please allow me to join the Demon Knights!”

A second later, dozens more joined him.

“I don’t fear death, Vice-Commander! Let me join!”

“We can’t let just demons have the honor of guarding Her Majesty the Demon Lord!”

“Vice-Commander, I want to join too!”

Perfect, they took the bait. I kept my expression grave and nodded slowly.

“I see tales of your bravery were not exaggerated. It is an honor to fight alongside such valiant warriors.”

I’ve finally done it, Friedensrichter. I’ve brought humans into the demon army. I bet you never expected that to happen, huh? I spent the rest of the afternoon shaking hands with each of the new recruits and filling out the paperwork to officially make them Demon Knights. In a few days, they would all be formally knighted by Airia in a grand ceremony. Hopefully the knights that were still on the fence would be swayed when they saw.

Satisfied, I returned to my office. I then called Baltze over and told him about the new additions to the demon army.

“And that’s why I decided to enlist human knights into the demon army. It might be hard to get along with them at first, but I’m sure you’ll get used to it.”

Baltze nodded thoughtfully and replied, “Don’t worry, Veight. I’ve spent a lot of time conversing with humans now; I should be able to handle them.”

“Perfect.”

Dragonkin were known for being stoic, but Baltze was a bit more expressive than most. The other dragonkin officers apparently hated the fact that he was always joking around, but he was such a skilled fighter that they couldn’t really complain. To me, it looked like he was just slightly less dour than the others, but I probably had different standards. What I saw as a slight difference the other dragonkin likely considered huge. That being said, it was certainly true that he was a lot more laid back. When I’d first joined the demon army, he was one of the few dragonkin who hadn’t been uptight about showing superior officers proper respect and the like. He was probably the general I trusted most within the demon army.

We chatted for a bit afterwards, and the topic of Shure came up, so I decided to see if he’d made any progress in their relationship.

“By the way, how are things going with Shure?”

Shure was supposedly one of the most beautiful dragonkin women, and Baltze was head over heels for her. The sudden question seemed to take him by surprise, and he said in a flustered voice, “W-Well, Lady Shure is...you know...”

It was pretty rare to see a dragonkin have such a human reaction. *Oh man, now I want to tease him even more.*

“Baltze, you’re off-duty now right? I just got my hands on some imported rum, so what do you say to sharing a few drinks with me?”

The rum brewed in the southern continent was made from sugarcane, or more specifically, the molasses that was left over from processing sugarcane. In Rolmund, they used beets to make something similar, but the taste wasn’t as good. Some parts of Meraldia were warm enough to grow sugarcane as well, but there wasn’t nearly enough to meet demand. Sugar was still expensive enough that common people tended to use fruits for their alcohol and desserts.

I mixed rum, a little bit of lime juice, and a few spoonfuls of precious sugar together to make a daiquiri. Sadly, I didn’t have any ice or a shaker, so all I could do was stir it.

“Why do you look so disappointed, Veight?”

“Well, there’s a way to make this mixture taste even better, but I

don't have the tools to do it."

A good bartender could make a daiquiri taste like heaven. Meanwhile, my pathetic excuse for a cocktail looked far from heavenly.

"This lime juice is pretty overpowering, so I kept it at one part juice to fifteen parts rum. Just like a Montgomery."

"What's a 'Montgomery'?"

"Long ago, there was this famous general who was known for his caution. It was said he wouldn't even go into battle unless he outnumbered the enemy fifteen to one."

Most of what I knew of him was trivia I'd gathered on the internet, so I wasn't an expert or anything. Besides, the Montgomery cocktail was a martini, not a daiquiri. *But I guess since the Hemingway is a frozen daiquiri, and Hemingway wrote about Montgomery, they're kind of related? Whatever, it doesn't matter.*

"I'm a lot like Montgomery, I think. I don't have the courage to fight unless I already hold an overwhelming advantage."

Baltze gave me an incredulous look. "Do you really expect me to believe that when you charge armies by yourself at every opportunity?"

"I mean, if I rush in alone, it means I'm the only one at risk. The rest of the army's safe."

Smiling, I held my glass up for a toast. We clinked our glasses together, and I downed my daiquiri. The lime juice did a perfect job of cutting the burn of the alcohol without overriding the taste. *Yeah, 1 part to 15 was the right choice.* Unfortunately, the lack of ice and proper mixing made it less delicious than it could have been.

"Warfare is easy because you can always tell whether you're at an overwhelming advantage or disadvantage. When it comes to diplomacy, though, it's impossible to tell where you stand half the time."

"People's hearts aren't something that can be quantified," Baltze replied with a nod. *It sure would be easy if you could represent the strength of a bond with numbers, like a social link.*

"I've always been a coward, you know. Every time I negotiate with someone, I'm terrified of messing up."

"Now I know you're just being humble."

Baltze chuckled, but as a former human, I knew just how scary humans could be.



He tilted his glass back and added, "But despite your fear, you were able to forge a lasting peace with humans. You even married a human woman. You're a strange person, you know that?"

"Actually, love is the scariest thing of all. Nothing about it is rational."

"I understand completely. A woman's heart is like the wind. It's impossible to perceive, impossible to understand. Yet it brushes softly against your scales nonetheless."

Baltze was quite the poet.

"How were you able to capture the Demon Lord's heart, Veight? Please, share your wisdom with me."

"To be honest with you, I have no idea. The whole time I was grasping around in the dark, until I suddenly found my way to the light."

Had the whole incident with Draulight's Legacy not happened, I might still have been just friends with Airia. I was such a coward that I only took action when I had a 15 to 1 advantage. But when it came to love, I had no way of gauging whether or not I even had an advantage, let alone how much of one. Hell, I had no idea what even constituted an "advantage." I probably never would, either. However, there was one thing my experiences had taught me.

"If you keep waiting until you're certain to win, you'll likely let your chance slip past you. I nearly lost my own chance because of that."

"I see..." Baltze fell silent for a few seconds, then drained his glass. "Thank you. I think I shall avail myself of your advice."

He got to his feet and headed for the door.

"Are you leaving already?"

"Yes, there's something important that I need to take care of. Please excuse me."

A few days later, Baltze came humming into my office with wonderful news. *Congrats, Baltze.* On an unrelated note, he apparently told everyone about my half-assed daiquiri recipe, and it became a huge hit within the demon army. The cocktail came to be called the "Werewolf Sting" and soon it was a staple in Ryunheit bars. Because it helped Baltze get together with his crush, it became a good luck charm, and people often drank it before attempting something daring. *But guys, a real daiquiri is way tastier than my crappy version...*

My mother in this world, Vanessa, was one of the most reliable people I knew. Now that I'd become married, she was Airia's mother-in-law too. Today, the three of us were eating dinner together.

"I was pretty surprised when you told me you were marrying a

human, but I was even more surprised when I learned she was the Demon Lord.”

Mom wasn’t part of the demon army, so technically Airia had no authority over her—she was just a normal demon civilian. Despite being a civilian, though, she was strong enough to beat down anyone in my werewolf squad if she transformed.

Airia swallowed a spoonful of Rolmund-style stew and said with a bashful smile, “I was only able to become the Demon Lord thanks to Veight. Had anyone else burst through my window that day, I probably would have died then and there.”

Stop, you’re making me blush. By the way, the window I’d shattered that day had been replaced with higher quality glass panes.

Grinning, Mom gulped down her glass of wine. She was a pretty heavy drinker, but she never seemed to get drunk. “Veight’s always hated fighting, you know. I was pretty shocked when he told me he was joining the demon army. After he left to study with Movi, I thought for sure he’d become a mage.”

“I just joined because I wanted the demon army to help guard our village.”

Mom nodded and replied, “Yeah, thanks to you, our village is doing a lot better. We’re very thankful for what you’ve done for us.”

The werewolves who hadn’t joined the demon army were still living peacefully in our village in the forest. They mostly subsisted off of farming and hunting.

Mom looked wistfully off into the distance and muttered, “You take after your father, you know. He was really mild-mannered for a werewolf, too. Whenever a fight broke out he always jumped in to stop it.”

If he was like me, he probably had a hard time getting people to listen. Despite the fact that I’d inherited my old personality when I reincarnated, I was apparently a lot like my dad. According to Mom, even our mannerisms were similar. *Maybe that was why I was reincarnated into this family specifically.*

Airia turned to me and asked, “But you never knew your father, did you Veight?”

“Yeah, he died when I was one year old.”

I wished I could have gotten to know him. In my past life, my dad had always been busy with work, so I’d never really experienced what it was like to have a father. The only person who I really felt a fatherly connection to was Friedensrichter. If I ended up being a dad sometime down the road, he would definitely be my role model.

I looked down, lost in thought. While I was reminiscing, Mom turned to Airia and said, “By the way, my son has a tendency of saying strange things when he spaces out. I hope that doesn’t bother

you.”

“Huh? O-Oh no, not at all.”

Airia blushed, and it wasn't because of the wine. *Dammit Mom, stop embarrassing me in front of my wife.*

“When he was little he'd mutter stuff like ‘Where's the ayshee bimote?’”

I was probably trying to say “Where's the AC remote?” Was my pronunciation that bad when I was a kid? It was around three when I remembered my past life, but at first a lot of the memories were hazy and indistinct. My child brain probably hadn't been able to process that much information, so maybe my pronunciation had been that bad.

“Hey, I'm not the only one who said weird stuff in their sleep. Nibert made weird moaning noises like ‘Gaa gaa’ and ‘Aeeee,’ remember?”

The ‘ga’ noises were probably him trying to say his older brother, Garbert's, name, but I had no idea what the other noises were supposed to be. When we were kids, Garbert doted on Nibert a lot. *Man, I wish I had a sibling.*

At first, I'd been worried Airia and Mom wouldn't get along, but they were already good friends. It helped that Mom was pretty easygoing and Airia was kind to everyone she met. *What a relief. If those two argued for real, they'd end up leveling the manor.* Fortunately, it looked like we'd be able to eat all our meals together without incident. Mom smiled as she worked her way through the pound cake Airia had baked.

“It's nice to see that Ryunheit has a ward for werewolves now.”

We'd just recently finished constructing a district for my werewolf squad and their families. It was called “Werewolf Street,” and though it wasn't exceptionally big, there were three butcher's shops in close proximity to each other. Moreover, for an added fee the butcher would grill the meat for you then and there.

“Why don't you come live here too, Mom? You could even bring the other villagers with you.”

“Well...” Mom glanced over at Airia before saying, “Actually I was planning on staying and protecting the village. If things don't work out with the humans, you'll need a place to come back to, right?”

Me and the werewolves from my squad had already spent a lot of time with humans, but the people who'd stayed behind were still wary of them. *Is she worried things could still go wrong?*

But then she smiled and said, “Though, I suppose that's unlikely to happen now that Ryunheit's viceroy is our Demon Lord.”

Airia placed a hand on her chest and said in a solemn voice, “I swear on my name as the Demon Lord that so long as they follow the

laws of Ryunheit, any demon is safe within my walls.”

It had taken a while, but Ryunheit had truly become a city where demons and humans lived together in peace. Not only was Airia the Demon Lord, but she had the unilateral support of all the human viceroys as well. The society Friedensrichter and I had dreamed of was finally a reality.

Mom scrutinized Airia for a few seconds, then nodded to herself. “I suppose if you’re generous enough to marry my airheaded son, I can trust you with the future of the werewolf race. The harvest just finished, so we’ll bring our potato crop with us as a present.”

“You won’t have to worry about starving if you live here. Plus, there’s plenty of work for werewolves to do.”

So long as they had enough strength to transform, werewolves could continue serving as warriors. That was why people like Vodd and Mary were still active. Even if some of them didn’t want to be soldiers, they could easily find work that made use of their strength, or their heightened senses.

Ryunheit had grown to the point where canines and dragonkin were a common sight on the streets. There were even a few giants and ogres who’d settled in, too. A few weeks from now, Master would bring the fungoids here as well, making Ryunheit even more of a cosmopolitan city. Speaking of which, I needed to talk to Master about that.

The next day, I broached the topic while we were having tea.

“Master, make sure to tell the fungoids not to encroach onto any graveyards when making their new nest.”

“Mmm, I shall.”

Fungoids considered corpses sacred, and their way of honoring the dead was to create new mushroom beds inside them. They believed that in doing so the life of the deceased was renewed through them. It didn’t matter whether it was a tree, an animal, or even a demon, they’d spread their seedbeds into anything. While it was their way of showing respect for the dead, Ryunheit’s humans wouldn’t take kindly to that.

“Perhaps it might be a good idea to impress upon them once more the importance of following Ryunheit’s laws.”

It was a relief to know that Master was taking this seriously. We’d passed the fungoids’ trial, so I was confident they’d listen to her warnings. *Oh yeah, since I’m already here, I should probably ask about the school, too.*

“How’s the teacher training going?”

I’d used my connections to gather as many specialists as I could in Ryunheit, but most of them had never taught a class before. They

were experts in their respective fields, but amateurs when it came to teaching. Master shook her head in disdain.

“Awful. Absolutely awful. These people don’t know the first thing about teaching.”

“I figured.” Sighing, I let Master rant.

“They fail to understand that one must adapt their teaching methods for each individual student. Nor do they understand what the true purpose of teaching is.”

“Those are the two things you care about most, aren’t they?”

When she’d been teaching us, Master had constantly been observing how long we could concentrate, where our strengths and weaknesses lay, and what our interests were. After she gathered enough information, she provided individually tailored curricula for all of us. It had been known for a while that that was what worked best back on Earth, but for this world, it was a novel concept. What was even more impressive, though, was that Master was constantly thinking about how the things she taught her disciples would help them later on in life. When I’d been learning how to be a teacher in my past life, that was a point all my classes had stressed.

It was hard to believe anyone in this world was able to come up with such a modern teaching philosophy. *No wonder everyone calls her the Great Sage.* Honestly, if it wasn’t for her, I probably wouldn’t have been able to become a mage. I wasn’t a fast learner by any means.

“Your teaching philosophy is too advanced for most people, Master. Though, that’s why you have so many brilliant disciples.”

“Teaching is one of the most important skills for a scholar to learn.” She puffed her cheeks out in indignation. “The techniques and knowledge they acquire only have value if they can be passed down. Fields of study can only advance if people transfer their wisdom to others, for it to be built upon.”

I get why you’re angry, but you’re expecting too much from them, Master.

“I agree with everything you said, but it’s your job to teach *them* how to teach. Your philosophy on instilling knowledge only has value if you can pass it down onto others too, you know.”

“Mrrrr...”

Master crossed her legs and started sulkily playing with her ankle. *I know you look like one, but you’re not a kid anymore, so stop pouting.*

She leaned so far forward that the point of her hat crumpled against the table and grumbled, “I suppose so. What you say is indeed correct.”

Master was surprisingly humble for a Great Sage. *Actually, that humility is probably how she was able to become a Great Sage.* There was still a good amount of time before the school opened, so there was no

rush to get the teachers in shape. Ryuunie would be part of the inaugural class, but he was still studying in Lotz. Shatina, Firnir, a few of the viceroys' kids, and some of the more promising young demon officers would be in the inaugural class as well. The more Meraldia modernized, the more we'd need people capable of skilled labor. My hope was to raise enough trained professionals that I could retire and let them handle things.

As if Master had read my thoughts, she turned to me and said, "Incidentally, I plan to appoint you Head Teacher of Diplomacy, so you should prepare a curriculum."

"What!?"

"Do you recall the lecture you gave on human psychology to the remnants of the Second Division? I thought you did a splendid job there, and so I want you to teach at my school."

I'm pretty sure those guys only listened to me because they'd just had their asses handed to them, not because I'm a good teacher... However, Master had already started gushing about how well I'd done, so I doubted I could talk her out of this.

"You have been able to bring everyone you meet, both demon and human, onto your side. How many people that were out to kill you ended up working with you instead? Your diplomatic abilities are worthy of being passed down. In fact, they will *only* have value if they are passed down. Two can play at this game, my young disciple."

Crap, I dug my own grave.

"But, Master, my negotiating tactics only worked because I backed them up with my superhuman strength, and—"

"It is your job as a teacher to devise methods allowing anyone to utilize your skills, and explain them to others. Besides, I am sure the students will be more motivated if they know the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander is teaching them personally."

"Fiiiine..."

Though, I feel like I'm not the best choice for a diplomacy teacher if you can beat me in an argument this easily...

While I was enjoying my peaceful days in Meraldia, Kuwol's king and the nation's coastal nobles continued their standoff. Wa was interested in establishing trade relations with Kuwol, but the Chrysanthemum Court was unsure whether they should negotiate with the king or with the nobles who controlled the ports. The Heavenwatchers had sent their ninjas out to gather intel, so they were waiting to see what they could learn. Naturally, Meraldia had sent out its own investigation team as well. The members were all handpicked by Petore, so I decided to ask him how things were going during the next council meeting.

“Petore, have you learned anything more about Kuwol’s political situation?”

This was Petore’s first time coming to a council meeting in a while. His age was finally catching up to him, and recently he’d been sending his grandson to attend meetings in his stead. Petore’s grandson had inherited his sharp insight, and he was apparently good friends with Ryuunie.

“Yeah, the whole place is fucked. That imbecile of a king managed to drag the whole country into his mess.”

For all his complaints about his age, Petore seemed to be pretty spry considering his tone. I threw some more logs into the hearth to make sure he didn’t get chilly and listened to his report. According to him, the nation of Kuwol had formed around the Mejire River. Many of its major cities were dotted around its meandering path to the open sea. The nobles who controlled those cities controlled trade along the river, but they had no ocean ports. That meant that they’d been uninvolved with the conflict between the king and the coastal cities. But because of how long the stalemate was dragging on for, Kuwol’s king had come crying to the river lords for help. As a result, the coastal nobles and river nobles were now at odds with each other too.

Sighing, I placed a cup of hot tea in front of Petore. “That sounds like a mess alright. Sorry for interrupting your report, Petore, but you absolutely must try this herbal tea. It’ll warm you right up.”

“Ah, thanks. I see yer as attentive as always.”

I had a lot of experience taking care of the elderly. I placed a plate of ginger cookies that Lacy had baked earlier on the table as well and motioned for Petore to continue.

“True leaders find compromises for their subjects’ disputes and avoid conflict. A king has to do those things better than anyone. But this bumbling moron’s sowing discord himself, so there’s no telling what might happen next.” Petore had spent decades mediating between the southern cities and the Senate, so he was incredibly passionate about the topic. “The prices of sugar and rum have skyrocketed all ’cause he had to go and raise taxes on his ports. The damned fool.”

“I guess we really don’t have any reason to help him, huh?”

Meraldia imported a lot of goods from Kuwol, but sugar was one of the most important ones. They grew sugarcane there, which was the most efficient source of sugar. Petore and Garsh both sold what they imported for cheap to the rest of Meraldia for a huge profit, so the increased prices hurt them the most. Meraldia wasn’t suited for growing crops with a high sugar yield, so there was no other way to obtain sugar either. Both humans and demons loved sweet things, so a sugar shortage would definitely hurt.

As Petore angrily wolfed down a cookie I mused, “Do you think civil war will break out?”

“No way to tell. Someone might assassinate the king before it gets to that point; maybe the coastal nobles and the river nobles will work out a deal, and the king will just have to eat shit.” He bit into another cookie and added, “The discord between the coastal nobles and the king ain’t going away anytime soon though. I’m washing my hands of that blasted fool. From now on, I’m only dealing with the nobles.”

Makes sense.

Time passed, and eventually winter rolled around. Because the seas grew stormy during this part of the year, it became harder to keep tabs on Kuwol’s situation. In the meantime, I helped Woroy make the rules for his new sport and experimented on new crop strains with Ashley. I also had to help the school get ready for its grand opening and work on reorganizing the demon army. The humans I employed for the army were separated into Demon Knights and Demon Warriors. The latter would serve as the Demon Knights’ rank-and-file soldiers, and I had both the knights and warriors learn Kuwolese in case I needed to dispatch them there. Petore also made sure the important members of the Commonwealth Council started learning Kuwolese as well. If something happened, they would serve as our diplomats to the southern nation.

Shortly after winter began, a messenger from Kuwol came bearing urgent news. Kuwol’s king had ordered the nobles loyal to him to gather their troops, and was gearing up for war. He’d already amassed a large army in the capital. The coastal nobles were understandably afraid that they were the target, and had started conscripting soldiers as well. On top of that, they’d sent an unofficial request for aid to Meraldia. When I received the news, I immediately called a council meeting.

“What do you guys think? Should we send our forces over?” I asked bluntly once the meeting started.

“I’d like to. If Kuwol’s ports get attacked, Lotz and Beluza will lose a big chunk of their income. There are only a few places for large cargo ships to dock along the southern continent’s northern coast,” Petore replied. Most of Lotz’s residents made their living off of trade one way or another, so his people would suffer if Kuwol became engulfed in civil war.

Garsh raised his hand and said, “I’ve got a lot invested in Kuwol too. Plus, Beluza’s been friends with viceroys of their coastal cities for centuries, I don’t wanna abandon them. If we don’t help them now, they’ll lose faith in us.”

The viceroys of Meraldia’s coastal cities were firmly in the “help

Kuwol's nobles" camp. I understood where they were coming from, but this wasn't a decision that could be made lightly.

"You two do realize that nothing good ever comes from sticking your neck in another country's civil war, right?"

"Is that one of the demon army's teachings or something?" Petore asked, and I shook my head.

"Not quite. Think about it. There's only so many troops we can send. Even if we raised an army of ten thousand, we don't have the ships to transport them all."

I'd read enough history books to know that sending troops to distant lands was a risky maneuver. Our soldiers would be fighting in unfamiliar territory, and there'd be little to gain even if we won. The northern viceroys were still wary of another invasion from Rolmund, so they were against sending troops too. Even among the southern viceroys, only Shardier's leader Aram and Zaria's leader Shatina were sympathetic to Kuwol's plight.

"Master, isn't there anything we can do to help them?" Shatina asked in a pleading tone.

Aram added, "Our ancestors came from Kuwol. If possible, I would like to make sure our ancient home remains peaceful."

Guys, I get how you feel. I also want Kuwol's people to live in peace, but sending our troops is just too dangerous. Once we dispatched those soldiers, we would be committed. This situation had to be navigated carefully, or it could spell disaster for Meraldia.

"Alright, how about we send over a few diplomats and Demon Knights under the pretext of 'protecting Meraldia's trade ships and better understanding the situation on the ground.' Petore, I hope you don't mind letting us borrow your warships for this."

"Just my warships? What about a landing force? You'll want one, won't ya?"

"If we bring over too many troops we might provoke Kuwol's king into doing something rash."

If the soldiers we sent ended up being the spark that started civil war, Kuwol's people would hate us for eternity.

"Our goal is to protect Meraldia's interests in Kuwol. If its coastal cities get burned to the ground, that'll harm all of Meraldia's economy, not just the southern cities."

Increased trade with Kuwol would bring extra money which could be used to strengthen Meraldia's infrastructure, education systems, and healthcare network. In order to help Meraldia modernize, we absolutely needed to protect our trade routes with Kuwol.

"Which is precisely why we need to make sure we don't incite a war. Besides, if a war does break out, we'll have a much harder time pulling out."

Honestly, I didn't know what the right answer was. Chances were, no one here did, but I was confident my choice wouldn't lead to Meraldia's demise, regardless of how the chips fell.

Airia nodded and said, "I think we should adopt my vice-commander's plan. Is there anyone who objects?"

No one voiced any further protests, and the motion was passed. Lotz and Beluza offered a single warship each for the operation, and we decided to send a few diplomats as well as the demon army's Demon Knights for this mission. The diplomats were chosen from Mondstrahl believers who had Kuwolese ancestry.

"Report back everything you learn, no matter how trivial. The smallest of details may end up proving vital later. Also, try and build friendly relationships with the river nobles if you get the chance."

Each of the warships had been assigned a port to guard. Woroy, who was also part of the council now, folded his arms and said with a grin, "If Kuwol's king attacks any of the ports that Meraldia's warships are guarding, we'll have an excuse to declare all-out war with him, right?"

"Right—which is precisely why we're sending our ships to the ports most likely to be attacked. That way Kuwol's king will have to think twice before making a move."

"Hah, you're planning on bringing turmoil to another foreign country aren't you? You can be pretty evil sometimes, you know that?"

"Don't give me that smile. I'm not letting you go, no matter what happens."

Hopefully the coastal nobles would appreciate us sending our ships to their most vulnerable ports. *Oh yeah, I should probably make sure Petore doesn't try anything reckless.*

"Remember Petore, if our ships *do* get attacked, our priority is to rescue our people and as many of Kuwol's civilians as we can, then flee to the open seas."

"Yeah, yeah. Not like infantry and knights are gonna be any good in a naval battle anyway."

Petore looked like he was sulking, but I could tell he was happy inside. *Man, dealing with old people is such a pain...*

Winter's chill had fully set in by the time Meraldia's two warships arrived in Kuwol's largest port, Bahza. The diplomats set out for the various coastal cities, guided by Meraldian merchants who served as interpreters, and guarded by the newly christened Demon Knights. I prayed for everything to go smoothly, but I knew in my heart it wouldn't. History had proven that when tensions got this high, blood was always shed.

The first report I got back consisted of some dried plant stalks. They looked like corn, but smaller. If I had to say, they were closest to pearl millet. Airia looked down at the stalks in confusion.

“What exactly were the diplomats thinking, sending this back?”

“Actually, I asked them to do this. Examining Kuwol’s staple food source will help us better understand their culture as well as their current situation. But man, these guys work fast. They managed to get unhusked stalks just like I asked, too.”

Judging by the leaves, the plant was a monocot. Like corn and millet, it appeared to be part of the Poaceae family. The locals called it meji, as it grew mostly in the floodplains around the Mejire River. It was a name with a lot of historical significance, but that didn’t mean much to me right now.

“Apparently, this is the main grain people eat in Kuwol. It grows all around the Mejire River, so it’s easy to cultivate.”

“Does it taste good?”

“That, I dunno...”

Seeing as no one imported it, I doubted it suited the Meraldian palette. Airia read the small note that had come with the stalks, which detailed how to cook them.

“So what exactly do you plan to do with these?”

“For now, I’m thinking of grinding them down and baking them into bread. We can all taste test.”

After that, I’d give the diplomats their next mission. With any luck, the materials they’d provided me would help win the river nobles over to our cause.

I ordered the diplomats to look further into Kuwol’s staple food, meji. I also asked them to look into what diseases were common in the area, and what the standard treatments for them were. The diplomats’ follow-up letter told me exactly what I’d suspected.

“Vice-Commander, we have done as you asked. In the regions around the Mejire River, there is a common disease known as River Rash. Upon asking the local doctors, we learned that it is mostly farmers who contract this disease. In its early stages, the disease causes rashes to appear on the face. Later on, it causes bouts of vomiting, nausea, and sore throat. In severe cases, the patient may lose their sanity or even die.”

That settles it. It’s definitely pellagra. It was a disease caused by niacin deficiency.

As Airia and I ate the bread I baked, I explained the significance of this report to her, “Staple crops with high yields tend to be lacking in certain nutrients. If they’re all you eat, you’re likely to get ill.”

Eating only corn would leave you deficient in niacin too. I’d heard

cooking it in an alkaline solution helped supplement the lacking vitamins, but I didn't know how that process worked. However, it was clear from the report that Kuwol's people didn't nixtamalize their meji, which was why they were so deficient in niacin. A few days later, I received an even more interesting report.

"Most doctors believe the best treatment for River Rash is a change in climate. Apparently, moving to the ocean and taking in the sea breeze helps most patients recover."

I explained the significance of that to Airia as well, "Since this disease is caused by a nutrient deficiency, eating nutrient-rich foods like fish will cure it. I learned this in my past life."

Tuna, mackerel, sardines, and cod all had niacin in them. *Thinking about fish is making me hungry.*

Airia chewed over my words and muttered thoughtfully, "If different food is what cures this disease, then you don't need to go anywhere to heal, right?"

"Yep. Though, we don't need to tell anyone that just yet."

Technically, you didn't even need fish. Animal liver worked just as well, but meat was expensive enough that commoners rarely got their hands on it. Chicken was cheap enough that most people could afford it, but not in large quantities. It was actually cheaper to take a boat downriver and get fish from the ocean than to buy meat. Unsurprisingly, nobles and nomads rarely ever got pellagra since they incorporated more meat into their diet.

Regardless, the important thing here was that farmers frequently traveled to the coast to heal. The river nobles depended on the coastal areas for fish to cure their people. If the river nobles openly declared war on the coastal nobles many of their farmers would die from niacin deficiency. Though I kept the particulars a secret, I had the diplomats tell the coastal nobles what I learned. Now the coastal nobles could dangle the threat of "If you attack us, all of your commoners will fall ill," in front of the river nobles. Hopefully, that would make the river nobles more willing to negotiate.

Of course, I knew this alone wouldn't be enough to sway the river nobles' minds, and it was always possible the threat would just make them more eager to conquer the coastal cities. I needed to find as many bargaining chips as possible to stack negotiations in our favor. I was a continent away and working with intel brought to me by others, though, so it wasn't easy.

Based on what the diplomats had learned, the nobles ruling the lands around the Mejire River weren't particularly fond of Kuwol's king either. From what I could tell, the relationship between the two noble factions was something like this: "Look, we're not that fond of

the king either. He taxes the hell out of our sugarcane plantations, but he makes us pay for all the irrigation work.”

“Then why not join us and put pressure on him!?”

“We’d love to, but we can’t exactly point our swords at the royal family... This king might suck, but we owe the last one a huge debt.”

“Well...fair, I guess.”

“We’ll try to smooth things over with him, so just give us a bit of time, okay? Surely he will see reason and realize he’s just shooting his own foot if he raises taxes on you guys.”

“You think so? We’re still gonna hire mercenaries just in case, but let him know we don’t really plan to fight.”

“You got it.”

Both sides seemed to be exchanging a lot of unofficial correspondence. It made sense, since both factions shared a culture, a language, and a religion. They’d even fought together on multiple occasions to defend the nation against barbarian invasions. Plus, they had very practical reasons to not fight each other.

“The sugarcane’s only got value if there are ports to bring it to, and the ports only got value if they have sugarcane to sell,” Petore said with a shake of his head. He’d come to Ryunheit to see what I was up to.

“The sugarcane harvested along the Mejire River gets processed in local sugar factories, but it’s not gonna make any money just sitting there. Not like the locals are short on sugar, so they take their harvest to the port and sell it to other countries like Meraldia.”

Not only was sugar in high demand, but it was easy to transport and didn’t spoil. It was the ideal trade good.

“As for the coastal cities, even if they’ve got ports and ships, they won’t make any money if there are no goods to sell. Both sides have to make sure not to piss the other guy off.”

That explains why civil war hasn’t broken out yet, even though tensions are so high. Neither side wanted to harm the other faction’s infrastructure, since it would hurt their own economy as well. *This is a pretty good deterrent to war. I wonder if we can get a relationship like this going with Rolmund?* At any rate this meant I didn’t have to worry too much about the Kuwol situation, and could focus on internal affairs.

Meraldia was a rapidly developing country. I needed to update laws, plan new cities, and train skilled personnel to keep up with the pace of modernization. The smallest slip-ups could lead to big problems, and I had to plan for the future while making sure everything ran smoothly in the present. This was probably the busiest I’d been yet. There was no way I’d be able to find the time to travel to Kuwol, so I could only pray things stayed quiet down there.

Sadly, Kuwol's situation continued to worsen.

"Our diplomats are all begging to come back home. They're scared for their life," I told Airia as I read over the latest reports during our afternoon tea session. Honestly, I felt kind of bad that I was reading reports during our break time, but Airia was such a saint that she never got mad at me for it. However, when I tried to spread the documents out on the table, she put a hand out to stop me.

"It's important to take regular breaks or you'll burn out."

"...Yes ma'am."

Sorry, I won't do it again.

"I imagine Kuwol's citizens are quite worried."

"Yeah. If civil war does break out, the people living on the coast are going to be invaded by their own king."

The coastal nobles didn't have much of a standing army, so they'd been hiring all the mercenaries they could find. Most of those mercenaries rarely took on jobs bigger than protecting cargo ships from pirates, so they lacked experience when it came to large-scale warfare. I doubted they'd last long if the king attacked. Since Airia knew I was a reincarnator, she often asked if my past life knowledge was applicable in times like these.

"Did anything like this ever happen in your past life?"

"All the time. Though, I lived in a peaceful era, so most of what I know is through history books."

"What do you think will happen now?"

You sure ask some hard-hitting questions, my dear Demon Lord. I folded my arms and considered the possibilities.

"The only peaceful solution at this point is for Kuwol's king to back down and try to find a way to repair relations with the coastal nobles. But if he doesn't do that, things will get ugly."

The whole country was one big powder keg. Both sides had amassed huge armies, and the smallest of things could set off a bloodbath.

"If civil war breaks out, there won't be anyone who can serve as a mediator. Since the country's highest power, the king, will be taking part, if the war drags out—no matter who wins—the country will be a shell of its former self."

The river nobles and the coastal nobles both had deep pockets. They could fund an all-out war for quite some time. If the battle devolved into a stalemate, Kuwol was doomed.

"The longer the war lasts, the more Kuwol's technology and infrastructure will deteriorate. Most nobles don't realize it, but their farmers and sailors are skilled workers. They're experts in seafaring and agriculture and so on."

However, when war broke out, they were the ones who died in

droves. Not only were they conscripted as disposable foot soldiers, but nobles rarely went out of their way to protect those who weren't fighting.

"If Kuwol loses the ability to grow and process sugarcane on a large scale, the kingdom won't be able to bounce back for decades—during which time its neighbors will probably strengthen their armies and look for an opportunity to invade."

Rolmund and Wa were on the cusp of modernizing. Meraldia wasn't far behind, either. Once there were a few industrialized nations, the age of imperialism would begin. I had no way of knowing what kind of political system Meraldia or Wa would have by then, but if I was dead I wouldn't be able to influence anything.

"Kuwol has a lot of rich farmland thanks to the Mejire River. It also has a number of large ports, and a valuable commodity in sugar. I can easily imagine someone trying to colonize it if the kingdom's power wanes."

"Colonize?"

"Yeah. It would mean trampling on the Kuwol people's rights, and it'd cause a lot of long-term damage, but in the short term, it'd bring huge profits to the colonizing nation."

Justice and compassion were meaningless in the world of diplomacy. They were nothing more than pretty words used to disguise the real driving force behind negotiations, which was little more than national interests. Cruel as it was, I wouldn't want any subordinates who prioritized lofty ideals like justice over Meraldia's best interests.

I briefly explained the concept of imperialism to Airia, then shook my head and added, "But any colonized nation will eventually regain its independence. You just can't control a region an entire continent away for long."

Independence would come with a lot of bloodshed too, and leave behind lasting animosity. Grudges like that were even more dangerous in this world, because Heroes existed. If one led a justified war of revenge against a colonizing nation, the casualties would be immense. Even if Meraldia wasn't directly involved in something like that, it would still feel the repercussions. I had no doubt that Kuwol probably had a few ancient Hero-producing artifacts of its own.

"If we care about keeping Meraldia strong one or two hundred years down the line, it's in our best interests to prevent a civil war in Kuwol. I'm not just saying this because I sympathize with its people."

Airia smiled at me and replied, "But you do sympathize with its people anyway, don't you?"

"Yeah."

My violent werewolf instincts were always lurking beneath the

surface, so I needed to be careful not to lose the humanity I'd retained when I reincarnated. The fact that I could still sympathize with the Kuwol people's plight was a reassuring reminder that I was still human inside. Of course, my position meant I couldn't extend a helping hand based on sympathy alone. I needed a valid excuse.

"There are wrinkles on your forehead again."

"Really?"

I rubbed my forehead and smiled ruefully.

"You're right. I guess I really do need to relax."

"I'm glad you're aware of it. I put Kuwol sugar in today's bread, why don't you take a break and try some?"

Sugar bread was one of Master's favorite foods. Though the recipe looked simple, it was a luxury few could afford. Only nobles had the money to serve it as a snack. Sugar was expensive, of course, but oil was too. *I hope I can make Meraldia rich enough that everyone can at least afford desserts like these.*

As I picked up a piece of bread, Airia chuckled and said, "You're frowning again. Look, I can see the wrinkles."

"Oh, man..."

I really need to learn how to relax.

The moment I finally had some free time after finishing up most of my work, Master dragged me over to Meraldia's newly opened university to give a lecture. Most of the buildings were still under construction, but the main auditorium had been completed. It was around January in past-life calendar terms, and the rest of the main facilities would be finished around April. Right now, all the teachers were taking turns introducing their topic and curriculum, which was why Master wanted me to give an introductory lecture as well.

The 40-odd students of the university's inaugural class came to the sparkling auditorium every day to study. Shatina and Firnir were part of that class, as was Ryuunie. Petore's grandson and Ryuunie's good friend, Myurei, also attended the lectures. He was 14—a year older than Ryuunie—and a pretty impertinent brat. But the reason Ryuunie looked up to him was because he was also sharp as a tack. Of course, his intelligence just made him cockier, but I had a feeling he'd grow up into a good leader.

There were also a few dragonkin in the class, as well as the three canines who had accompanied Ryuunie during his journey through Meraldia. They were named Pan, Paka, and Paan, and were apparently the smartest canines in their village. Though they looked childish and innocent, they were undeniably intelligent. They were also skilled artists, and they'd not only painted multiple scenes of Woroy's achievements, but also wrote a detailed drama about him. I'd asked one of them for a short excerpt, and this was what he'd given me:

“Lord Woroy’s spear punctured the bandit’s sternum and exited out his back. He retracted his weapon with blinding speed, and the hapless villain crumpled, lifeless, to the ground. As Lord Woroy shook his spear to dislodge the blood coagulating on its tip, the remaining bandits struck in unison, assailing the prince in a blizzard of steel.”

The text was a bit too fancy to make for light reading, but it proved these three canines knew their stuff. They were good at staying cool under pressure, too. Meanwhile, I had to come up with diplomacy lectures that these crazy geniuses would actually find helpful. The problem was, my primary strategy was to threaten people with my overwhelming might, then butter them up a little and make them more amenable to my requests. That was hardly a complex enough strategy to be worth teaching. That being said, I had prepared a lecture beforehand, so it wasn’t as though I was going in blind.

I loudly cleared my throat and walked forward a few steps. The students were sitting pretty far back, so I figured I should get close enough for them to hear.

“Alright, guys, I’m here today to teach you about diplomacy. But don’t expect anything profound from me. After all, my own methods are pretty slipshod.”

I smiled slightly at the students, but their expressions were dead serious. Everyone was such an honor student that I suddenly felt bad for trying to lighten the mood.

“I’ll be starting with the basics today, and the first thing I want to cover is the concept of ‘subordinate allies.’ All of you have many such people around you, so it’s important that we talk about this first. Myurei.”

“Y-Yes, Professor?”

Surprised, Myurei jumped to his feet. He probably thought all he needed to do was listen, but my lectures were based on the teaching methods I’d learned in my past life. Asking students frequent questions was how you kept them engaged.

“Nobles and commanders have servants and soldiers working under them. Those servants and soldiers are allies of those they serve, but are clearly subordinate to them. As a noble yourself, what do you think is the most important thing to keep in mind when dealing with such ‘subordinate allies?’”

Myurei straightened his back and replied in a loud voice, “T-To not let them look down on you!”

“I see, that certainly is an important factor. Thank you.”

I nodded, and Myurei puffed his chest out proudly. I motioned for him to sit down, then asked Ryuunie, who was sitting next to him, the same question, “What about you, Ryuunie? What do you think?”

Ryuunie pondered the question for a few seconds, then replied,

“To not disparage their profession?”

“Yes, that’s another good answer. Very good, in fact. Thank you.”

I ruffled Ryuunie’s hair out of habit, and he blushed slightly. *You really like headpats, huh?* I looked at the rest of the students and said, “What Ryuunie just said touches on a very fundamental point. I’ll explain what I think matters most now, so listen up.”

I walked over to the stone wall that served as a blackboard and began writing on it.

“In negotiation, the most important thing is to not threaten the other side’s standing. For humans, threatening their standing is equivalent to threatening their safety. No matter how menial their position might seem to you, that person derives a sense of belonging and safety from their role in society.”

I glanced out the window, where the garden was still being constructed. The Aindorf family’s gardeners were busy planting flowers and trimming bushes under the winter sun.

“For example, a gardener is an expert at botany, as well as the manager of their empire, the garden. Even the Demon Lord herself has no right to tell them how to do their job, because she cannot maintain a garden the way they can.”

On the other hand, she always complained to me about my budget allotments and economic policies. It made sense though, since she was from a merchant family. *That reminds me, I need to redo the R&D budget for next year for her after this.* I’d apparently asked for too much, and Airia wanted me to cut it down a good deal. If I didn’t rein in Kurtz and Master’s wanton spending, she’d be cross with me. I put those problems out of my mind for now and turned my attention back to my students.

“What Ryuunie said about not disparaging their profession ties directly into this.”

Ryuunie beamed, while Myurei pouted. He was clearly unhappy that he’d gotten the wrong answer. Sighing to myself, I decided to stroke his ego a little as well.

“Of course, positions of power such as viceroy or general are professions as well. One of the biggest threats to your profession is not being respected. In order to win the respect of those around you and not be seen as inferior, you need to constantly show that you deserve the position you’re in. In other words, you gave a perfectly correct answer as well, Myurei.”

Myurei’s frown instantly transformed into a smile, and he once again puffed his chest out proudly. *Hmm, did I praise him too much? It’s hard to tell how much is enough.* I then went on to talk about what Eleora had done when she’d visited her uncle, Lord Kastoniev’s domain. She’d praised the low-ranking overseers who managed Lord

Kastoniev's villages to the moon. The overseers had been overjoyed to have their hard work acknowledged, and Lord Kastoniev had fostered further goodwill by increasing their salaries and raising their status.

"The words of those who stand above others have great weight. Being a leader is a heavy responsibility, and the power you wield is not something to be flaunted."

I added the last bit to drive the point home to Myurei. Unsurprisingly, his face fell again. *Man, I really don't know how to act with him.* Of course, there was also something I needed to drive home to Ryuunie.

"On the other hand, you cannot get too friendly with your servants or soldiers in public. It is their duty to follow your orders, and if you are a good leader, then they will take pride in that duty. It is especially important to treat everyone equally when you are leading troops in battle, so that your men see you as a fair leader. That isn't to say you can't become friends with those who work under you, but you cannot show preferential treatment in front of others."

This time Ryuunie hung his head, looking forlorn. *Look, I'm not scolding you guys or anything. You don't have to look so sad.* Lecturing kids was harder than it seemed.

"Some of you were taught how to act around servants by your parents. I'd like to know what it is you learned, so I'll be asking you one by one."

I asked all of the noble children the same question, and wrote their answers onto the blackboard. I then went on to explain each of the bullets in turn.

"This answer here, 'Be sure to thank your servants when they do things for you' ties into my previous point. You need to show with your words that you're satisfied with their work."

Petore rarely ever said anything more than "Good" to his servants, but they'd known him long enough to understand that was praise.

"There's also 'Grant them extra rewards when you ask them to work outside of their normal schedule,' which is a very good answer. This will not only make your servants more loyal to you, but it will also make it clear what their expected duties are, and what counts as an irregular request."

I went on to tell the students stories about a maid who'd saved her master from a hoodlum, or a cook who'd discovered what illness plagued his lord by observing his diet. Both were servants who'd served the Aindorf family in the past, and had been rewarded for their exceptional service.

"If a servant aids you in some way not specified by their duties, it means you owe them a debt. There's nothing wrong with that in and of itself, but a lord who doesn't repay their debts soon finds their

position in jeopardy. No one will follow a thankless leader.”

I read out the rest of the answers.

“Praise your servants when others are watching, but scold them in private.”

“Dismiss those who continually make small mistakes, but give second chances to those who rarely make large ones.”

“If there is a problem with one of the maids, consult the chief maid first. Likewise, if there is a problem with one of your cooks, consult the head chef first.”

“A lord who doesn’t treat those who’ve left his service well will soon find his reputation in the mud.”

Each of these answers had a deeper truth hidden within them, which made expounding on them worthwhile. The older a house’s lineage was, the more likely their sayings held weight. The precepts Ryuunie had learned from his parents were a veritable treasure trove of anecdotes. The Rolmund imperial family had gone through a lot in its time, after all.

Once I extrapolated on everyone’s answers, I told a few stories of my own from my time in Rolmund, then asked what the ideal way to treat their subordinates would be. I went to each student in turn and had them demonstrate what they thought the answer was.

Most of the kids learning here would grow up to be generals and viceroys, and the few who wouldn’t would still hold important stations. All of them would have people working under them. If they didn’t understand how to treat those workers, more people would end up like Kite had while working for the Senate, or like I had in my past life. Were that to happen, Mereldia would slowly collapse from within. There was no objectively correct answer when it came to interpersonal relations. I couldn’t give these kids a handbook for how to act, but I could at least teach them the importance of thinking about how they behave. The rest they’d have to figure out on their own. *Man, being a teacher is hard.*

“Alright, that’ll be all for today. Next time I’ll bring up a more complex situation, and we’ll take a look at how it should be handled.”

Man, that was tough.

“Master!”

Once the lecture was over, Shatina came running over to me. She was someone who still had trouble properly handling people. It wasn’t surprising considering she was still a teenager, but she was also a viceroy, so she needed to learn fast.

“You’re not grabbing messengers by the collar anymore, are you?”

“I-I stopped doing that!”

When I’d first met Kite, she’d grabbed him by the collar and hauled him over to me. *Come to think of it, he’s really had it rough.* As I

smiled to myself, Shatina made a strange face and asked, “Master, how is it that you know how servants feel?”

I did a double-take, but then immediately smiled and said, “I mean, I started out on the lowest rung of the ladder myself.”

“Oh, I see.”

Though, I’d started out in the demon army, where I had a good boss and proper working conditions. Plus, my direct superior was Master. Most of what I knew came from my experiences in my past life.

After reminiscing for a few seconds, I turned to the energetic young viceroy and asked, “In order to make sure the Commonwealth Council doesn’t end up like the Senate did, I need youngsters like you and Firnir to guide Meraldia down the right path. Can I count on you, Shatina?”

Her eyes sparkled, and she straightened. “O-Of course! I’ll do my best!”

There’s a lot riding on your shoulders, Shatina. Just then, the vice-chief maid for the Aindorf family walked into the lecture hall. She was a little older than Airia, and someone she had a long-standing relationship with. Though her title was just that of a maid, she’d been around long enough that she was more like the general affairs manager for the Aindorf family. She worked in the Aindorf manor located in the old residential district, so it was rare for her to come all the way out to the new district. If she had a message for me, she usually sent a runner over to deliver it.

“I didn’t think you would still be here, my lord.”

“Did you need something, Isabelle?”

In an excited voice, she said, “If your business for the day is done, please return home. My lady has an important report to make.”

Airia does?

I hurried back home to find Airia and Master both waiting for me. When I saw Airia’s bashful smile, I immediately guessed what she was going to say.

“Veight, I have something very important to tell you.”

“Okay.”

I took my coat off and sat down in front of her. Blushing a little, she announced, “I’m pregnant.”

Those words brought a mixture of relief and unease. In all honesty, I’d pretty much given up hope that we’d be able to have kids. My soul was human, but my body was that of a werewolf’s—our race had evolved to prey on humans. It was difficult to believe we could have children with them. This was why while Airia’s announcement came as a surprise, I was happy.

Seeing my dumbfounded expression, Airia asked in a worried voice, “Umm, is something wrong?”

“N-No, not at all. It’s just, I didn’t think it was possible, so it took me a second to process. But this is wonderful news. Thank you, Airia.”

I took hold of her hand. Her blush grew more pronounced, and she nodded quietly.



Wow...I'm going to be a father. I'm so glad I reincarnated.

Beaming, Master said, "I shall be keeping an eye on the baby's development, so you need not worry. As a result of my research, I have a better grasp of human and demon bodies than most doctors. Naturally, I mean their entire bodies, not just their skeletons."

"Yeah, I know."

The reason Master had been able to teach me strengthening magic was because she already possessed a wealth of medical knowledge. I had gotten so used to using magic to heal wounds and cure diseases that I'd totally forgotten Master was an accomplished doctor. *But man, that's still a bit of a shock.*

It had only been three months since we got married, and we hadn't had many opportunities to be alone together. *Maybe werewolf DNA is closer to human DNA than I thought.* I wasn't sure if the principles of evolution functioned the same way in this world, but if they did, perhaps werewolves had evolved from primates and not wolves. *Now I'm curious.*

Seeing my expression again, Airia said, "Whenever he makes a face like that, he's thinking of something complicated."

"Indeed. Knowing him, it is something academic yet banal."

Crap, they found me out. Look, it's a really interesting biological question, okay! I cleared my throat and said, "Airia, it's all thanks to you that we've been blessed with a child so soon. Thank you. I'll take over your duties for now, so you should rest while you're pregnant."

"I appreciate your concern, but I *am* the Demon Lord. I shall manage just fine."

"Not happening. You absolutely mustn't overwork yourself."

I turned back to Master and asked, "Master, can you keep an eye on Airia and make sure she doesn't push herself too hard?"

"Says the man who does nothing but push himself too hard," Master grumbled, though there was a smile on her face. A child of one of her disciples was probably like a grandchild to her.

"Well, I suppose I could. This is a child between a human and a werewolf, so it is not as though I could ask a human doctor to look after Airia anyway."

Thanks, Master.

"Umm, by the way, do you know if it's a boy or a girl?"

"The baby is too young to even have recognizable features. How could I possibly guess its gender this early?"

It appeared not even Master could tell yet. *But man, I really wanna know. Oh yeah, we should probably think of names!*

"In that case, we need to think of names for both genders. A dignified name would probably be good for the Aindorf family heir,

right? Oh, but it has to be easy to say and sound nice, too.”

Master chuckled and said, “No need to be so hasty. The baby won’t even be born until autumn.”

“Autumn, huh. We should probably think of a name that matches the season then.”

Meraldia had no tradition of picking names based on the season of birth, but I wanted to put a little of my past life’s culture into the name.

“Do you think it’ll be a werewolf baby? Or a half-werewolf? Or pure human?”

“Calm down, child. And sit down.”

I looked down and realized I had been pacing across the room. It seemed I was a lot more worked up than I realized. I sat back down, but I couldn’t contain my excitement.

“Master, we should create an OB/GYN ward for the demon army’s hospital. If we have midwives teach our doctors what they know, we’ll be able to have properly trained obstetricians.”

“I said calm down! Airia, please get your husband under control.”

Airia brought her hands to her cheeks and said with a grin, “I’m sorry, but he just looks so cute when he’s flustered like this.”

“They really are perfect for each other...” Master groaned.

Most of Meraldia’s midwives were Mondstrahl believers, so they considered Mitty their leader. As an astrologer, she was often present at births, and she was a skilled midwife herself. I told Mitty Airia was pregnant the next day, and she immediately agreed to help Airia deliver a healthy baby. *Thank god I curried favor with the Mondstrahl Church ahead of time.*

Once I finally settled back into a stable rhythm, I received an unbelievable report from across the sea.

“Urgent report, Lord Veight! Port Bahza is under attack!”

“That’s where Meraldia’s warships are stationed! Are the sailors safe?”

Civil war better not have broken out now of all times. The report the messenger handed me in reply did not contain good tidings. Port Bahza was situated on the mouth of the holy Mejire River and was the largest port in Kuwol. Small ships from further inland transported goods there, which were then sold overseas. It was one of their most important waterways.

Apparently, soldiers had hidden in one of those small boats, then set fire to the port once they reached the city. Fortunately, the fire had been detected early and the damage was minimal. A few warehouses had burned down, but that was all. There had been a raid by armed troops at the same time as the fire which had primarily targeted the

port's facilities, so casualties were low. They'd also launched fire arrows at Meraldia's warships, and a few sailors had been injured. However, the worst was yet to come. Depending on how the coastal nobles reacted, things could get very ugly.

"The coastal nobles are furious, and they believe Kuwol's king perpetrated the attack. They sent a strongly worded letter demanding an explanation."

"Not good."

No one had been able to discover the identity of the assailants. There was no proof that Kuwol's king or the river nobles had instigated this attack. Personally, I doubted they were responsible. This was a guerrilla assault which had targeted the port's facilities. The raiders had managed to slip away under the cover of night, but their attack hadn't reaped any tactical benefits. This was likely a political stunt of some sort. It was hard to imagine these raiders were acting independently.

"Something's not right. Tell the coastal nobles to not do anything rash. Also, tell the warships to pull back. Make sure the Demon Knights and diplomats know they need to leave as well."

The messenger gave me a confused look. "A-Are you sure, sir? The coastal nobles are saying they'll fight to get revenge for what happened to our ships..."

Damn. They got us good. It all made sense now. One of the coastal nobles had probably instigated the attack.

I called for an emergency meeting of the council to decide what to do next. As expected, opinions were split. The northern viceroys had gone through two conflicts back to back and were tired of fighting.

"This is clearly a scheme devised to force us to cooperate. We should retreat now while we still have the chance," Dunieva, Vongang's viceroy, said. A deep frown marred his gentle features. "It is much harder to end a war than start one. We have no reason to involve ourselves with a foreign country's civil war."

I agree completely—except the two viceroys who have south-facing ports can't back out even if they wanted to.

"But Kuwol's soldiers sacrificed their lives to protect Meraldia's ships. They're even treating our injured sailors and paying for the ships' repairs," Garsh said, folding his arms.

Petore nodded and added, "Veight's got a point here. The coastal nobles might have done this to tie our hands. Still, it's in our best interests to help 'em out. Don't worry, we don't have to actually fight for 'em. We can just send a force and have it sit there to intimidate people."

"What if the enemy targets our warships?" Belken, Krauhen's viceroy, asked.

The northern viceroys were being cautious, while the southern ones wanted to forge ahead regardless of the risks. *This isn't good. If we don't find a compromise soon, they'll be at each other's throats.* I was the only neutral party here, so I needed to mediate between the two sides.

"In that case, I can..."

Wait, no I can't. When I turned back to Airia, my suggestion died in my throat. I needed to support her during her pregnancy. I couldn't afford to go traipsing to a different country to solve their problems.

"...Nevermind."

Unfortunately, I couldn't really ask anyone else to go to a country on the brink of civil war and mediate for me.

"No one would dream of asking you to handle this task, Veight," Aram said with a sad smile. *Come to think of it, he got married this spring too, didn't he?*

Garsh raised his hand and said, "Hold on a second, guys. There's no need for the council to get involved. I can just send my landing force as reinforcements. Ryunheit should be safe even without them now."

Beluza's landing force was currently stationed in Ryunheit. They had introduced its residents to Beluzan cooking, and they'd been around so long that they felt like a permanent fixture of the city.

"They're my private troops so the council doesn't have to sign off on anything. I'll pay for their transport, too. Plus, I made sure they're down to do this. Oi, you can come in now!"

Grizz, the Beluzan landing force's captain, walked into the room. As always, his mohawk attracted attention.

"My landing force can speak a bit of Kuwolese as well. They're not really religious, but most of the men are also Mondstrahl believers. And they're not unruly like mercenaries. Whaddaya guys say?"

"Well... Grizz, are you guys really okay with going? You might have to fight a war on foreign soil," I asked.

Grizz grinned and replied, "Come on, Veight, do you even have to ask? Fightin' for our boss is our job!"

Foreign expeditions were more taxing than Grizz realized, especially in a world like this that didn't have modernized supply lines or medical care. But Grizz just slapped his shoulder pads and smiled at Airia.

"We've got a saying in Beluza. 'If you're not popular with the ladies, then maybe you should be nicer to kids, old ladies, and pregnant women!'"

Everyone in the council knew Airia was pregnant. It was technically a matter of the state, so it was only natural they'd been informed. Grizz looked like a delinquent, but he was a high-ranking commander, so he'd been told too. His grin was so pure that I couldn't

bring myself to tell him to stay behind. Instead, I said, “Make sure you send constant reports. Your handwriting sucks, so you better write slowly and legibly.”

“You got it, man.”

“Also, don’t get into fights you don’t have to. Just protect the port, and don’t go on the offensive unless the council orders you to.”

“Aye aye.”

Hopefully, that would mean Grizz wouldn’t have to fight at all.

“I don’t plan on granting you permission to march inland, so don’t expect to be on the invading side.”

“Dude, you’re more uptight than my mom.”

“I’m not done yet. Be sure to follow the laws and customs of the land. Don’t accept any gifts anyone offers you. The last thing you want is to be in anyone’s debt.”

Grizz started slowly backing away, so I got up from my chair and chased after him. There were still more warnings I needed to give.

“Boil your water before drinking it—The Mejire River’s water quality isn’t the same as here. You don’t want to risk getting sick. In fact, I’ll give you some extra funds, so stick to drinking wine if possible.”

“Wait, seriously? You’re the best, man!”

I wasn’t done yet.

“They’ve got a lot of grain dishes over there, but make sure you eat plenty of fish, too. You guys will probably do that anyway, but I felt like I should warn you just in case.”

Grinning, Grizz nodded. “So what you’re saying is, drink tons of wine, eat tons of tuna steak, and take it easy?”

“More or less.”

“Hell yeah! Now that’s a job I can do!”

Grizz pounded his chest confidently. *Oh yeah.*

“One last thing.”

“There’s still more!?”

“You guys are going to Kuwol for political reasons. There’s no need to fight more than necessary. Your biggest priority is bringing as many of your troops back alive as possible. Don’t forget, the men who died protecting Ryunheit are waiting here for all of you.”

“Yes, sir.”

Grizz saluted respectfully and walked out of the room.

With that, it was officially decided that Grizz’s troops would be dispatched to Kuwol’s ports. Meanwhile, the diplomats and Demon Knights we’d sent earlier would come home. It seemed there were people actively hunting our diplomats now, and they couldn’t do any work without an armed escort. With how dangerous their jobs had

become, we judged it would be best for them to come home and report in detail what they'd learned. However, this meant we would need to send a new diplomat over with Grizz—preferably someone high-ranking enough to get an audience with the king.

As I was thinking of who to send, Parker walked into my room.

"Hey, Veight, I heard you're going to be a father soon."

"Yeah, it's a weird feeling."

"I never married, so I'm afraid I can't empathize."

Wow, this is the first time he didn't start a conversation with a joke. Did he eat something weird? Wait, no, he can't eat. Parker donned his human illusion and smiled at me.

"I heard you're having trouble deciding who to send to Kuwol. I was thinking I'd volunteer to make your life easier."

"You want to go?"

"The whole reason I don't have an official title and am part of the demon army's reserves is so I can take care of odd jobs like these, isn't it?"

It's not, actually.

"No, the reason I didn't give you any important posts is because I don't trust you with that much responsibility."

Parker sighed, but a second later his smile returned. "Must you always be so rude?"

"I don't want to hear that from you." I grinned back at him, then asked, "Are you sure you don't need to be helping Master with her research?"

"Master's a better necromancer than me by far, and if she needs an assistant, there's always Melaine."

Though he said that, Parker was easily the best necromancer among Master's disciples. He noticed what I was thinking, and shook his head.

"All of my necromancy is self-taught. Melaine has a better grasp of the methods Master uses. Honestly, there's not much I can help with." Parker feigned a sigh, even though he didn't breathe. "Melaine, Ryucco, Kite, and Lacy are already assisting Master; she doesn't need me. In fact, I happen to have quite a bit of time on my hands."

"Really?"

I mulled over Parker's words, formulating a plan in my head. He had never said much about his past, but it was obvious from his mannerisms that he came from a wealthy family. His court manners were perfect, and he knew more about politics and economics than Master.

As if he'd read my mind, Parker said, "The council's diplomats are skilled, but they don't understand what it is you truly need them to do. On the other hand, I understand you perfectly."

I couldn't deny that. Parker and I went way back.

"Besides, I can't be assassinated. I am, for all intents and purposes, immortal."

Parker had transcended life and death, and was neither alive nor dead. Even if humanity was annihilated, or this planet was destroyed, he'd continue existing as a skeleton. In that respect, I didn't need to worry about his safety. Plus, he was the most trustworthy diplomat I knew.

"Alright. Can I count on you then, Parker?"

"Of course!" he replied with a beaming smile.

I consulted with Airia and Master as well, and they both agreed sending Parker was the best choice. We decided to officially send him as the Beluzan landing force's military doctor, but naturally, his true objective was to negotiate with both sides as the Demon Lord's envoy. For all intents and purposes, he was my representative in Kuwol. He could also summon large skeleton armies in case of emergencies, so he'd prove a valuable asset in combat as well. But even though I knew he was capable, I couldn't help but worry.

Soon enough, the day of his departure came. He left with Grizz's 200-man landing force, and a few of the mermaids he'd befriended offered to join them for the journey. They couldn't do anything in Kuwol, but they were willing to patrol the seas to ensure safe passage.

I sent the entirety of Meraldia's meager navy with Grizz, so there were no warships left in Meraldia's ports. The two warships that would be returning with the Demon Knights and diplomats would be integral to protecting the seas while Grizz was away.

While we were waiting for the two warships to return, there was a new development back home. During breakfast one day, Airia suddenly got to her feet and covered her mouth.

"Airia?"

She tried to signal to me with her eyes.

"Are you about to throw up?"

She nodded silently, waved for me to sit back down, and ran out of the room. Isabelle followed after her, so I figured she'd probably be fine. I immediately called Master over and had her check up on Airia. The verdict was exactly what I'd expected.

"It's morning sickness. I have never experienced it myself, but I believe it is a similar sensation to being hung over."

Master had never been hung over either, so she had had no frame of reference. I've at least had a hangover before, but even then, hangovers passed. Feeling like that constantly sounded awful.

Airia lay on a nearby sofa, trembling slightly. It was an unsightly look for a Demon Lord, but that didn't matter right now. She was

normally so cheerful; it hurt to see her in pain like this. From the looks of things, though, rubbing her back would only make her feel worse, so I wasn't sure what to do.

"My Lord, allow me to handle this. I have experienced morning sickness myself, so I know how to treat it." Isabelle knew Airia better than most people, and she had experience raising children, so I knew I could trust her. "Besides, taking care of Lady Airia is part of my job."

Pale-faced, Airia muttered, "S-Sorry...could you take care of my...work for me? I'll be fine..."

It was undeniable that I'd be more help doing Airia's work than worriedly watching over her.

"Sure. I can take over. If anything happens, call for me right away, Isabelle."

"Of course, My Lord."

I hurried back to my office, feeling the weight of responsibility pressing against my back. Now I couldn't leave for Kuwol no matter what happened. *I'm counting on you, Parker.*

Airia's morning sickness was exceptionally severe, and she had trouble keeping food down for a while. She couldn't sleep for more than a few hours at a time, either. Though she possessed more mana than anyone else alive, she wasn't able to control it yet, and her body was still that of an average human's. I was a werewolf and Master's body was more like a vessel than a proper body, but Airia was still susceptible to normal diseases and the like. She spent the first day in bed, eating nothing except a few peeled apples.

For a while, I was worried Airia might be dying, but it turned out this was normal for humans. Werewolves had really light morning sickness, so I'd been expecting something closer to that. She had a hard time even talking, so I wasn't able to spend much time with her either. This situation continued for a few days, during which I took care of all her duties. Near the end of the week, Garsh dropped by for a visit.

"Whoa, that's some serious morning sickness. Be careful how you act around Airia for a few days, Veight. She'll get pissy if you ignore her, but she'll get pissy if you're too fussy too."

"It's going to be hard not to do both."

"Yeah, but she'll definitely hold a grudge if you can't pull it off. I know my wife did."

What on earth happened with your wife, man? Garsh was looking down with a forlorn look on his face. He'd done a good job raising his daughter and two sons so I had faith in his parenting advice, but I wasn't sure if I should trust his marital advice.

"Southern women are feisty, and Airia's no exception. If you make

her mad, you'll come to regret it. Trust me."

"I see..."

Well, she was the first viceroy to declare independence from the Senate and ally with the demon army. Incidentally, Garsh's wife was Petore's daughter. By all accounts, she was a gentle, refined person, but Garsh appeared to be terrified of her.

"Ah well. I guess it's a husband's duty to be henpecked, so I can't really complain!"

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yep! You look pretty whipped yourself. If even the great Veight can be tamed by his wife, then everyone can. Hell, even Petore's a slave to his wife. He's head over heels for her even at this age."

Now that I can't imagine...

Fulfilling both mine and Airia's duties simultaneously was an arduous task. There were people more qualified to be Airia's representative than me, but since I was her husband, everyone expected me to fill the role. It made sense due to my signature being the only one that carried as much weight as Airia's, but that didn't change the fact that I was an amateur when it came to politics and legislation. I had to run around asking specialists in various fields before signing off on anything, which made processing paperwork take way longer than it should.

My biggest worry, though, was still Kuwol. Letters had to be transported by sea, meaning my intel was always at least a week old. Formulating a policy with a time lag that big was hard. Of course, I got detailed reports from all the diplomats who'd returned, but they hadn't been the greatest investigators. I couldn't really blame them, since gathering information on foreign soil was difficult. With how haggard they'd been when they arrived, I could tell they'd done their best.

I granted the diplomats a hefty bonus and gave them leave until spring, then started thinking about my next move. At present, the coastal nobles were busy training their mercenaries. Most of them had only ever served on ships, so they needed basic training in maintaining formation and the like. It was clear from their actions that the coastal nobles were expecting a land war. Meanwhile, the king had stationed his personal troops in the cities close to the coast.

The river nobles wanted nothing to do with this game of chicken and insisted to both sides that they were remaining neutral. I felt bad for them, honestly. Regardless, this meant merchants weren't traveling to Kuwol, thus hindering my plan to fill Meraldia's coffers with trade revenue. A few days later, Fumino came to tell me how bad Wa had it as well.

“Our paper, silk, and pottery all fetch high prices abroad. We expanded our production precisely to sell to other countries; at this rate, we’ll have an excess of supply and domestic prices will tank.”

“Believe me, I feel your pain. I was hoping to enrich Meraldia by developing new trade routes as well.”

Fumino walked over to the fireplace to warm the mochi she’d brought with her and asked, “Is there nothing that can be done, Veight?”

“I’m trying everything I can...”

Fumino gave me a knowing smile and said, “We have dispatched our best spies to keep an eye on the situation, but we have no troops to send.”

Catching on to her meaning I grimaced and replied, “We’ve sent a few soldiers, but for now, I want to focus on gathering intel.”

Smiling, Fumino flipped her mochi over. It was a crisp brown color.

“What do you say to joining forces once more?”

“That sounds like a splendid idea to me. We are allied nations, and Meraldia owes Wa a huge debt.”

“Ehehe.” Fumino cut the block of mochi in half and offered one to me, along with a bowl of soy sauce. “Then shall we share this mochi as a sign of our friendship?”

“Of course.”

Is it just me, or has everyone been coming to me for help recently?

* * * *

—Parker’s Report—

How’s it going, Veight? Actually, I guess this is an official report, so I should refer to you as Vice-Commander. Hahahaha, I can just imagine your scowl as you read this. Whoops. Let me write down my actual report before I forget.

The 188 members of Beluza’s landing force have all arrived safely in Port Bahza. As you might suspect, we received a warm welcome; though, some of the nobles were disappointed when they learned only Garsh’s personal troops had come. Of course, they know Petore’s a cautious man, so they don’t blame him for withholding support for now. If the king does end up taking the ports from the nobles, he likely won’t trade with any city which helped them. Petore made the right choice by remaining neutral. The coastal nobles are smart enough to realize that; which is why they don’t resent him.

Now then, let’s talk about Kuwol’s king. His name is Pajam the Second, and as you’ve heard he’s a wasteful, foolish man. He’s still in his early twenties, and he spends most of his days with his concubines,

composing poetry and the like. Honestly, I envy his lifestyle, but I'll be blunt, he doesn't know the first thing about politics or military strategy—though he is a surprisingly good poet.

Unfortunately, in this country the people believe their king is a child of the moon god given flesh, so no one is willing to openly oppose him. That being said, he is meant to have absolute authority, so building up troops without his permission is already tantamount to rebellion. He probably feels the same way the Senate did when you were consolidating your power in the south.

One good thing is that all the nobles fear the king's authority. Even the coastal nobles don't want to fight him directly. They would much rather attack the river nobles and chip away at his support base. Despite this, though, everyone's still afraid things might escalate into an all-out civil war. Personally, I think the biggest danger lies in the mercenaries the coastal nobles have hired. Their morale is so high that I'm afraid they might attempt something rash. Grizz shares my concerns, and the Demon Knights were worried about the same thing when they left. I have to admit, it's strange to see mercenaries being so proactive about their job.

Normally, they try to do as little as possible while still getting paid. But these guys—they've been training nonstop, and even volunteering to go out on scouting missions. Something's not right. The mercenaries aren't honor-bound to serve the king the way the coastal nobles are, so there is no telling what they might do. As of now, they're the biggest threat in Kuwol. That being said, they're surprisingly obedient and organized. They seem more like a proper army than a ragtag band of fighters. On top of that, they treat civilians with respect, so everyone loves them.

Everything I've told you up until now is information any old diplomat could have obtained, so you might know a lot of this already. Let's move on to the meat of the matter here. I did my best to gather the kind of information you care about, so hopefully this helps.

First of all, as far as I'm aware, no demons live in Kuwol. There is supposedly a race of "strange" people living far upriver, but they're well past the nation's borders, and it was hard to determine from the rumors if they're just a different race of humans, or demons. There are also a number of nomadic tribes that trade with Kuwol at times, and occasionally raid the kingdom's villages, but they have no interest in this power struggle. These nomads are Mondstrahl believers as well, and I suspect they share a common ancestor with the Kuwolese people.

The magic of this country isn't very advanced. The concept of magic as a formal branch of study hasn't solidified, and there's a lot of superstition surrounding what it can do. Simple spells are considered

holy charms. If a mage uses epoch magic to look for a place to dig a well, he's thought to have divine powers. The very concept of "mages" doesn't exist. I don't know if the country was just doing so well that it didn't see any need to further develop its knowledge of magic, or if its strong ties to religion made it difficult to study empirically. It's a fascinating question to ponder.

Anyway, because of that, I suspect Kuwol doesn't have any legendary Hero-creating artifacts. I haven't heard rumors of any, either. So far, I've only explored the coast though, so it's possible there are hidden treasures further inland. If I get the chance, I'll definitely go looking.

How's that for a useful report? Much better than the ones you've gotten so far, right? I bet I know exactly what kind of expression you made when you read that line, haha. Anyway, I'll send a follow-up letter in a few days. I know how busy you must be, so if you can't find the time to write a reply, that's fine. You just got married too, so you should spend some time with your new wife instead of overworking yourself like usual.

I hope things are well there. Take care.

* * * *

"Even the way he writes is so annoying..."

Despite my grumbling, I appreciated that Parker had kept his report concise and to the point. Mages who were also diplomats were a rare and valuable commodity, so I was blessed to have someone like Parker that I could rely on. Considering how quickly he'd investigated all of this, he'd probably summoned some skeletons to help him out.

Come to think of it, he didn't mention how the food or the weather or anything is. He couldn't feel heat or cold, nor could he eat, so that was hardly surprising, but I felt a little bad that he couldn't fully enjoy his trip abroad. If only there was a way to at least temporarily restore his sense of taste. It was a real shame he couldn't sample any of Kuwol's famous sweets.

Meanwhile, Airia was still struggling through her morning sickness. She had good days and bad days, and on the upswing days, she at least felt well enough to talk to me. She constantly talked about how she craved meat, but the smell of it made her sick to her stomach, so I stuck to feeding her peeled apples and porridge. Recently, even porridge seemed to trigger her gag reflex, so the past few days she'd only eaten apples.

"I'm sick and tired of apples, but everything else makes me sick..." Airia grumbled, and I gently patted her on the back.

I wanted to give her some words of encouragement, but the midwives had told me saying things like "You'll get through this," and

“It’ll all be over soon,” would only irritate her. I couldn’t imagine how hard it was dealing with a hangover for two weeks straight, but even a guy like me could more or less understand why she didn’t want to hear empty words of encouragement right now. Of course, I couldn’t tell her that since that would make her mad, too...

In the end, the only thing I could think of to do was to nod silently. I already missed the early days of our marriage where we’d joked around with each other and flirted in the short breaks we had between work. Regardless, though, I knew Airia was the one who had it the hardest. I needed to do my best to support her.

Despite being used to handling paperwork, doing two people’s worth of it still wasn’t easy—especially since Meraldia was still a nascent country. Once we got our bureaucracy sorted out, the Demon Lord wouldn’t have to deal with every single issue. But until we’ve reached that point, most things still had to go through me or Airia.

“What’s this? A research report from Melaine? Hemomancy?”

It seemed Melaine had found a way to multiply human blood—vampires’ food source—by combining necromancy with healing magic. With this, she would need to harvest a lot less blood to feed her people. *That’s great and all, but is that really something you needed to report to the Demon Lord? Whatever, I’ll just pass this along to Master and Kurtz.*

I looked at the next document in the pile, which was a petition for the Demon Lord to mediate the dispute between the brewer’s guild and the carpenter’s guild. It seemed they were fighting over who had the right to dictate barrel sizes. *I’ll just send this to the merchant guild, they can take care of it. I really wish everyone would stop immediately turning to the Demon Lord for everything.*

Below that was a request from Shatina to give Zaria more funds. The city didn’t have enough to pay for the wall they were building. *Sorry, but we don’t have any money either now that trade with Kuwol has dried up.* This was an issue that would probably need to be discussed at the next council meeting. *Why are all these reports about things that aren’t my problem?*

Fortunately, the regular council meetings served as a good outlet for me to complain. Most of the human viceroys were married men who had kids. The only exceptions were Aram, Woroy, and Shatina—and of course, the demon viceroys, Melaine and Firnir, were still single. The remaining 14 were married. It was important for noble families to leave behind heirs as soon as possible, so most viceroys got married and had kids early.

“I see even the famous Black Werewolf King can’t handle his

wife's morning sickness," Dunieva said with a playful smile. "My wife yelled at me all the time when she was pregnant. Unfortunately, there's nothing you can do."

The other men at the table smiled ruefully. Petore turned to Aram and said, "Take a good look, Aram. This is what happens to men who get married."

The young viceroy of Shardier was going to be married soon.

"Err, well, I'm not too worried about having anyone inherit the family name, so..."

"Trust me, the sooner ya have kids, the better. You'll get to spend more time with yer wife and kids that way... Though, all of mine left when they got married."

Petore had three daughters, but they were all living with their respective husbands now. Myurei's father was a merchant who lived in Lotz, so Petore could see him and his daughter anytime, but he wasn't very fond of this particular son-in-law.

"That fool's not fit to be a viceroy. He's too busy chasing money to see the big picture. Gah, why did all my daughters have to fall for such worthless men!?" Petore said when the topic of his son-in-law came up.

"Hey, are you saying I'm worthless?" Garsh growled, glaring at Petore.

"Ya bet I am! In fact, yer the worst of the lot! If Grasco could see ya now he'd be disappointed. I can't believe I promised one of my daughters to his son!"

"Well don't blame me for that!"

Petore was always hard on Garsh, but I had a sneaking suspicion the old man was quite fond of him. Small talk like this happened every meeting, since we usually had time left over after discussing all the items on the agenda. From what I heard, the viceroys had all been this close with each other even during the Senate days.

Personally, I was glad we could banter like this, but Airia must have found these meetings awkward in the past. After all, she'd been the only bachelorette. Even in my case, everyone had become friendlier to me after I got married. And when they learned Airia was pregnant, they started acting even nicer. Humans had a tendency to alienate those they viewed as different, but they were surprisingly nice to those they saw as similar—especially when those similarities were of an intimate nature. Basically, we were all dad friends.

Another few weeks passed, and spring came to Meraldia. Airia's morning sickness was a lot less severe now, which was a huge relief. She seemed to have taken a liking to the mochi Fumino had brought before, and she'd been eating nothing but that for a few days now. She

still hated bread porridge, but rice cakes were fine for some reason. It was especially confusing since most Meraladians seemed to hate the texture of mochi. As a result, even traveling merchants didn't sell it, and I had to ask Fumino to bring more. *I just keep owing her more and more favors, huh.*

"Mochi is expensive even within Wa. Rice plants pollinate using the wind, so it's difficult to keep our sticky rice strains from cross-pollinating with long-grained rice. And mochi can only be made with pure sticky rice," I explained to Airia one day.

"I didn't realize it was so difficult to make... Once I am feeling better, we should go to Wa to thank Lady Fumino in person."

I wanted to tell Airia more about the properties of sticky rice, but she was starting to look annoyed, so I left it at that. She ate her mochi plain, which was unfathomable to me. The whole point of mochi was flavoring it.

The situation in Kuwol continued to worsen as time passed, and soon the outcome I'd been dreading finally happened.

"Lord Veight, please return to your office immediately. There's been a new development with Kuwol."

Fumino burst into the lecture hall while I was in the middle of teaching. I could tell from her expression and from her scent that it wasn't good news. *It finally happened.*

"Alright, everyone split into pairs and spend the rest of class practicing the intimidation methods I taught you. Remember, the trick to effectively intimidating someone is to provide a way out for them that benefits you, and to carefully corner them into taking that path. Don't push too hard, or you'll scare them into fighting back."

After assigning everyone a task for the rest of class, I hurried back to my office with Fumino. There were a number of Wa's ninjas waiting for me.

"Lord Veight, Kuwol's coastal nobles have openly rebelled. Eight thousand soldiers and three thousand elite mercenaries are now marching on the royal capital of Encaraga," one of the ninjas explained.

They were still dressed like the Kuwolese merchants they'd been pretending to be. Apparently, the king's reply to the coastal noble's letter had been so infuriating that it had tipped them over the edge. Now their 11,000-strong army was rowing their way up the Mejire River to Encaraga at top speed.

"Are they seriously planning on overthrowing the king?"

To the Kuwolese people, their king was sacred. His authority was absolute. Back on Earth, medieval kings had only limited authority over their feudal lords, so rebellions weren't as big a deal. Meanwhile

in Kuwol, the word for king was “Daiyamejire” which roughly translated to “Lord of the sacred Mejire.” Every last drop of water and every last pebble within the river was the personal property of the king. He lent stretches of the river out to nobles who were loyal, but ultimately it belonged to him. Denouncing the king meant denouncing the very foundation of the nobles’ own authority.

Another one of the ninjas bowed and said, “I don’t think they intend to go that far. According to the coastal nobles, their goal is to defeat the river nobles and leave the king isolated and helpless.”

They’re probably hoping they can play this off as a dispute between fellow nobles, and force the king to listen to their demands. The only army under the direct control of the king was his royal guard. It comprised only 4,000 soldiers, and was nowhere near as large as the rebel army. The king’s fate depended on how the river nobles reacted. If they joined forces to crush the rebel army, they’d have the advantage in numbers. However, that would mean the cities downriver would suffer serious damage.

“What are the river nobles closest to the ocean doing?”

Yet another one of the ninjas replied, “The coastal nobles have already signed secret treaties with the rulers of those cities. Officially, they’ve surrendered to the coastal nobles and are remaining otherwise neutral.”

“I see.”

So they don’t want any fighting on their doorstep. The river nobles didn’t want their fields or the ports to take any collateral damage, so they would probably avoid fighting the invading army. Sighing, I organized my thoughts.

“The king is outnumbered right now, but he’s reaping what he sowed, so I don’t really feel any sympathy for him.”

Meraldia had no reason to protect Kuwol’s king. The only thing we were interested in was keeping the country’s sugar ports open. However, if Kuwol’s king was overthrown, there was no telling what would happen to the country. It was entirely possible the ports would get damaged in the ensuing chaos. Also, I felt bad for the common people. They were the ones who’d suffer the most during this rebellion.

“Even if we sent our troops now, they wouldn’t arrive in time to make a difference. I’ll tell Garsh to order his troops to remain on standby.”

“Understood. We shall follow suit, then.”

If the news was reaching me now, that meant the civil war had been going on for a few days. There was little I could do to affect the outcome at this point. In fact, it was entirely possible the war was over already. If I were to go there in person, perhaps there might be

something I could do, but that wasn't possible while Airia was still pregnant. There was no way I would abandon her while she was suffering.

The next day, I received a report that sorely tested my resolve not to go to Kuwol.

“Vice-Commander, horrible news! Sir Parker has gone missing!”

“What!?”

According to the report Grizz had written, Parker had traveled inland to continue his investigation and hadn't returned since. No one knew what exactly had happened to him, but he'd been pretty deep into Kuwol territory when the rebellion had started. I was the one who'd ordered Beluza's landing force to remain at the port, so I could hardly ask them to go looking for Parker.

Goddammit Parker, you're a pile of bones. Just pretend to be dead and let the river carry you back to the sea. I could tell I was panicking. Parker's body was immortal, but his mind wasn't. There was no telling what kind of horrors he was witnessing in the middle of a civil war. Since there were no reports of skeleton armies attacking either side, I assumed he was hiding somewhere safe. *Please let that be the case.*

One thing I did find strange was that the coastal nobles had begun their rebellion the same day Parker had left for the inner territories. Normally, I would have written it off as a coincidence, but Grizz mentioned there were a lot of people who seemed to be unusually interested in what Parker was up to. Most of them had been mercenaries, and they'd offered to serve as Parker's bodyguards, but he'd politely declined. Parker's default setting was rude as hell, so for him to *politely* decline meant he'd been quite wary of them. He changed his attitude based on his impression of people, and anyone he was polite to was dangerous. Moreover, he'd mentioned in his first report that he found the mercenaries' attitudes strange. There was definitely something suspicious going on with those guys.

Praying for Parker's safety, I returned to my work. But I couldn't concentrate, and I ended up redoing a report a dozen times over. *I'll just get someone else to write this tomorrow.* I let Airia know I finished my work for the day and sat down to watch her eat. I'd be eating my own dinner later. Airia was extremely sensitive to food smells right now, and couldn't be in the same room as me when I was eating. Which was why these days I had my dinner after her. Fortunately, even if Airia's sense of smell was still messed up, her appetite was at least returning.

As she chewed on her grilled mochi, Airia smiled at me. “I've stopped feeling nauseous when smelling food recently. According to Gomoviroa and Mitty, I should be free from morning sickness soon.”

Thank god. We'll finally be able to eat together again. A second later her expression clouded over.

"...I heard Parker went missing. You want to go look for him, don't you?"

I didn't know she'd been told. *Though I guess it makes sense, since she is the Demon Lord and all.*

"I do, but I know I can't."

The only other people capable of taking over Airia's duties were too busy to do so, and I had no one I could ask to take over my duties either. But to my surprise, she replied, "I've been feeling a lot better recently, so I can return to work if need be."

"Even then, I have no intention of leaving you behind."

I would be going to a foreign country in the midst of a civil war. Of course, I was confident I could return safely, but that wouldn't stop Airia from worrying.

Airia just shook her head, though, and said, "This is an emergency. I'm fit enough to work, so I can't just sit here doing nothing."

"No way. You still need to rest. What if something happened to you or the baby?"

Airia straightened her back and shifted into Demon Lord mode.

"I am your *wife*. The wife of the famous Black Werewolf King. I can't afford to take advantage of your kindness when your friends need you."

The moment she finished saying that she sagged back in her chair, looking dizzy. *Jeez, why is everyone around me so reckless!?* I tried to guide Airia to bed, but she waved my hand away.

"As your Demon Lord, I command you. Head to Kuwol at once and put an end to this civil war, Vice-Commander Veight. Find our missing diplomat and ensure Meraldia's interests in the nation are protected."

The only interests Meraldia had regarding Kuwol were trade related. The main things we wanted to protect were our relationship with the coastal nobles, as well as their ports and merchants, and their sugarcane fields. Their merchants bought Meraldia's wares at good prices, and they already had working relations with ours, which was why we wanted to protect them as well. In general, we wanted to make sure Kuwol remained stable so that we could export to them and import their goods. The nature of the nation's power struggle didn't matter to us in the slightest, so our only desire was to put an end to it as swiftly and peacefully as possible.

"It's true that this is a serious matter for Meraldia but...are you sure you want me to go, Airia?"

"Yes. I'll soon be a mother, and from what I hear, mothers are far

stronger than anyone thinks. So I'll be fine." Pale-faced, Airia gave me the most confident smile she could. Blushing slightly, she added, "But could you please...hold my hand? Just for a little bit."

Judging by how nauseous Airia looked, she'd probably puke if I tried to hug her.

"I'll gladly do anything for you, Your Majesty."

I gently took Airia's hand into my own. It was cold and clammy and trembling slightly. The last thing I wanted was to leave when my beloved wife was in this state, but at the same time, I was extremely worried about Parker.

"I promise to be back in time for the baby to be born. And this time, I'll keep that promise."

Airia smiled and replied, "It's fine. You don't need to rush. I'll understand if something happens."

I'm sorry things keep ending up like this.

* * * *

—Beneath the Frozen Sun—

Parker slipped his pen and parchment into his pouch and rose to his feet.

"Isn't it about time you showed yourselves? I know you three have been following me since I left Bahza."

Three armed men stepped out of the bushes near the river. Parker recognized all of them. They were mercenaries who had recently been hired by Lord Bahza.

"I believe I declined your offer to escort me, so why are you here? You are ostensibly allies, so I would like to resolve this as peacefully as possible."

Mostly because Veight will throw a fit if I don't. Parker thought to himself. The mercenaries wordlessly drew their machetes. The black liquid glistening on their blades was likely poison.

Sighing, Parker said in fluent Kuwolese, "I'm rather fond of my life. Is there no way we can talk things out?"

The mercenaries didn't realize that was a warning, and they started circling around to surround him.

"Now that you've spotted us, I'm afraid we can't let you go," one of the mercenaries muttered in heavily accented Meraldian. *Well... Can't say I didn't try. Not very hard, but still.*

"Alas. I suppose this is the end of the road then."

"I'm sorry it has to be this way."

The mercenaries raised their machetes and charged. Parker didn't even bother dodging the three blades. But as the weapons reached him, the mercenaries' eyes widened in surprise.

“Huh!?”

One machete passed through Parker’s windpipe, while another whizzed through his side, and the last one slipped through his stomach. It was hardly surprising, since he had no flesh to cut.

“What are you!?”

Parker removed his gloves, showing the mercenaries his bony white fingers.

“I see you’ve finally realized. It’s the end of the road for you, not me.”

Parker’s finger brushed against one of the mercenaries. He abandoned his illusion and spoke a curse.

“Grasp hold of death.”

A second later, the mercenary crumpled to the ground, unmoving. Though his body was unharmed, he was dead.

“Waaaaah!?”

In the time it took for that mercenary to scream, Parker reaped his second victim. A simple touch with his finger was enough to suck the life out of him. The final mercenary tried to run, but his legs felt glued to the ground. His soul was already under Parker’s control.

Stiff as a board, the mercenary shouted, “Y-You’re a monster!”

“Indeed I am.”

Parker touched the man’s forehead like a priest blessing a supplicant, and the final mercenary fell to the ground. The only sound that could be heard was water flowing in the distance. After making sure there were no other enemies around, Parker put his gloves back on and dispelled the death curse on his fingers. He gazed at the spirits of the dead mercenaries with his empty eye sockets, and listened to what they had to say.

“I see. You didn’t like that I was investigating this country’s situation, so you tried to assassinate me and pin it on the king. I suppose if a diplomat such as myself were killed, it would drag Meraldia into this war as well.”

A few miles away, Bahza’s mercenaries were advancing on one of the river nobles’ fortresses. It would be too dangerous for Parker to try and return to Bahza now. He patted his skull and donned his illusory human appearance once more. Here, he couldn’t show anyone his true face. His beloved Master and precious brethren were a continent away. Parker dearly wished to have a candid conversation with someone, but there was no one here he could trust. The sun was blazing overhead, but he wrapped his skeletal body in an old, tattered cloak.

“This land is quite cold, Veight...” Parker muttered as he trudged away from the river.

I immediately started making preparations for my departure, eternally grateful that Airia was such an understanding wife. *Just you wait Parker, I'm coming for you.* I needed to end this pointless civil war and find my friend as soon as possible.

There hadn't been time to expand Meraldia's puny navy, and most of our warships were already in Kuwol. If we committed any more of them to this expedition, we wouldn't have enough to guard our merchant ships. At best, I could requisition a single ship. This meant I would need to bring along the demon army's strongest fighters, my werewolf squad, once again. The 56 members of the werewolf squad were stronger than a human army 10 times their size. In fact, they could be even stronger if utilized effectively. We were skilled at setting up ambushes and other guerilla tactics, much like the American marines back on Earth.

It pained me to assign my closest comrades the most dangerous missions over and over, but as usual, I didn't have much of a choice. Besides, they seemed eager to go despite the danger.

"Hell yeah, we're finally getting to fight again!"

"We haven't gotten to take part in a war since Rolmund!"

"Man, I can't wait!"

Their enthusiasm was reassuring, but also worrying. Sighing to myself, I started packing everything I thought I might need. Halfway through, Myurei and Ryuunie walked into my office.

"P-Professor, we have a request!"

"What's up?"

In a nervous voice, the future viceroy of Lotz said, "My grandfather has been keeping me up to date on the situation in Kuwol! Please take me with you! I can speak Kuwolese, and I'm sure I'll be useful to have around!"

"Come on, be sensible now. There's no reason for a student like you to go to the battlefield. What would you even do there?"

Why are young boys always so eager to go to war? I had a similar phase back when I was a teenager on Earth, so it wasn't as though I didn't understand Myurei and Ryuunie's feelings. However, as a responsible adult, I couldn't just send them off to battle.

"Umm, Myurei wants to get a better understanding of the situation for Lotz's sake as well. I'll come too to keep him out of trouble," Ryuunie interjected.

I was honestly amazed Ryuunie was offering to go after what he'd experienced in Rolmund. He'd lost his family to civil war, and even had his life targeted by assassins—he was a surprisingly resilient young man. But while I respected the boys' drive, I couldn't afford to

take them.

“Prince Ryuunie, when the empire was collapsing in on itself, all you could do was run. You still haven’t learned enough to be a diplomat. Focus on your studies for now so that when you really are needed, you’re ready.”

I turned to Myurei and chided him as well.

“Myurei, if you come, I’ll have to assign werewolves to guard you twenty-four seven. That will reduce our fighting strength. I know Kuwolese as well, so I won’t be needing an interpreter.”

“How come you used Ryuunie’s title there, but you just called me by name?”

I gave Myurei a provocative smile and said, “Because he survived a civil war. He may appear meek, but he’s far more mature than you, Myurei Fikartze.”

That seemed to really hurt Myurei’s pride.

“B-But...”

“If you don’t like being outdone, then work harder at your studies. Don’t worry, when I was your age I was a brat like you. Ryuunie is special.”

I patted Myurei’s head to take the sting out of my words. He frowned at the childish treatment, but didn’t have the courage to push my hand away. A decade or two from now, he’d be leading the Commonwealth Council together with Shatina and Firnir. If he didn’t wise up before then, he would cause problems not only for Lotz, but for all of Meraldia. As his teacher, it was my responsibility to raise him well. That being said, I did appreciate how proactive he was being.

“Myurei.”

“Y-Yes, Professor?” he asked sulkily.

I gave him a sincere smile and said, “I believe that you will be a truly splendid viceroy someday.”

He looked up at me in surprise. “Really?”

“Absolutely. It’s not just me, either. The other teachers have high expectations of you as well. The reason we’re all teaching you is because we believe it’s worthwhile. Otherwise, we’d just be twiddling our thumbs and roasting mochi or something during class time.”

“What’s mochi?” Myurei asked, cocking his head.

I ignored the question and said, “As soon as the situation in Kuwol is stable, I’ll gladly take you both there. In fact, it will be a good learning experience for you to meet and mingle with the people you’re trading with.”

“Th-Thank you!” Myurei turned back to Ryuunie and puffed his chest out proudly. “See, Professor thinks highly of me too!”

“Yep! I knew he would. After all, you’re smart *and* brave Myurei!”

Myurei scratched his head awkwardly at Ryuunie's heartfelt praise.

"W-Well...yeah..."

That exchange told me a great deal about the relationship between the two boys. Myurei had an inferiority complex because of how much Ryuunie had achieved at such a young age, but Ryuunie was completely unaware of it. Even in Meraldia, Ryuunie was growing up surrounded by people who cared for him. That was a good thing of course, but I hoped that didn't make him too naive.

Myurei pumped a fist into the air and shouted, "Let's go, Ryuunie! I'm going to study hard and become the best viceroy Lotz has ever seen! Then I'll travel across the world and learn everything I can!"

You should probably do the traveling before you become a viceroy, not after. At any rate, I was glad Myurei had finally given up on going with me. After Myurei and Ryuunie left, I returned to my packing. I needed to complete this mission as fast as possible for their sakes as well. The first thing I was planning on doing upon reaching Kuwol was pacifying the coastal nobles. After that, I needed to find out whether or not the king was safe. His armies would most likely be decimated, but if I could just keep the king himself alive, it would be possible to resolve things without further bloodshed. *Parker is...probably fine since he's immortal, but I should at least go pick him up while I'm at it.* It would be a difficult mission, but I would have the elite werewolf squad at my side. I had a feeling I'd be able to fix things one way or another.

* * * *

—A Teacher and her Students—

After leaving Veight's office, Myurei continued bragging to Ryuunie.

"See? Even the professor thinks I'm someone who'll carry the future of Meraldia on his shoulders. I guess it makes sense since gramps is on the council."

Ryuunie gave Myurei a confused look and replied, "But my uncle is on the council too. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Umm, well Gramps has been on it since the council was formed, and I'm from a prestigious noble family, so..."

Myurei tried to justify his position, but Ryuunie countered with, "The Rolmund imperial family has been around since the time of the Rolmund Republic, so it's quite prestigious, too. I still don't see why that's important."

"Y-You're from the Doneiks family though, aren't you? Isn't that a branch family?"

“Yes, but we’re still in the line of succession for the throne so... Huh?”

As Ryuunie tried to figure out if his family qualified as a branch family or not, Myurei breathed a sigh of relief. *That was close... I completely forgot he was royalty...* Vexing though it was to admit, Myurei had to accept that Ryuunie came from a better family than him. The question was, if he couldn’t brag about his lineage, what *could* he brag about? Myurei racked his brain, but he couldn’t find an answer.

“Anyway, forget about pedigree for a second. I... Oh yeah! I know a bunch about economics! I’m good at math too! Do you know what you get if you add every number from one to a hundred?”

Ryuunie pondered the question for a few seconds.

“Umm...is it five thousand and fifty?”

“Wha— How did you calculate that so fast!?”

Ryuunie smiled and replied, “You just have to multiply one hundred and one by fifty, right?”

“Huh? Why a hundred and one and not just a hundred?”

Ryuunie crouched down and started writing numbers in the sand with a rock. “If you add one and one hundred you get one hundred and one, right? Then if you add two and ninety-nine you get one hundred and one again. The same happens for three and ninety-eight and so on.”

“Whoa, you’re right!”

“There are fifty pairs of numbers that add up to one hundred and one in total, so if you just multiply that by fifty, you’ll get the right answer.”

“Hang on, did you come up with that just now!?”

“Yep!”

Myurei suddenly felt dizzy. *Damn, I can’t beat him when it comes to math either!* His vision darkened, though it wasn’t because he was about to faint. Someone had walked over and their shadow was covering him.

“What are you two doing crouching on the ground like that?”

Looking up, Myurei and Ryuunie saw a beautiful woman wearing an elegant dress and ostentatious jewelry. Her clothes and accessories were all high-class products from Veira. However, the woman’s beauty far eclipsed the radiance of her clothes. Both of the boys recognized her.

“Lady Melaine!?” they shouted simultaneously, and the vampire queen grinned.

“If it isn’t Ryuunie and...who were you again?”

“Myurei!”

“Ah, yes. Now I remember. You’re Lord Petore’s grandson, aren’t

you?”

How come Ryuunie's the one everyone remembers!? Myurei thought, gritting his teeth. But despite his frustration, Myurei was beginning to see why everyone fawned over Ryuunie. The young prince really was special. If he was honest with himself, Myurei wanted to be more like his younger friend. The problem was, he didn't know how.

Melaine looked down at the numbers Ryuunie had drawn in the dirt and cocked her head.

“Is this the kind of math kids these days are studying?”

Though she looked like a beautiful young woman, Melaine acted like an old aunt. She crouched down, heedless of the fact that the hem of her dress was brushing against the ground, and examined Ryuunie's numbers in more detail. *I heard Lady Melaine is an immortal vampire. She looks young, but how old is she actually?* Myurei was dying to know, but he didn't have the courage to ask.

“Lady Melaine, what's that?” Ryuunie asked, pointing to the thick book in Melaine's arms.

“Oh, this?” Melaine replied with a smile. She cracked the book open and flipped through its pages to show Ryuunie its contents.

“It's a grimoire filled with the latest magical discoveries.”

People use the word “grimoire?” Myurei thought to himself. He wasn't a mage, so he wasn't familiar with their lingo.

“We vampires need to drink the blood of normal humans to survive. But if we suck too much of someone's blood, they die of anemia and get reborn as a vampire,” Melaine explained.

“If you take just a little, though, it's not a problem, right?” Myurei asked.

“Correct,” Melaine replied with a nod. “But we're quite fond of the taste of blood. In fact, I would love to drink the blood of healthy young boys like you two.”

Melaine grinned, showing her pointed fangs to Myurei and Ryuunie. *She might look nice, but she's a demon who feeds on us. A shiver ran down Myurei's spine. Still, it might not be so bad to let a beautiful woman like her suck my blood...* Fear and desire warred within him.

Noticing Myurei's gaze, Melaine flicked his forehead.

“Come now, don't give me such a longing look. You'll make me really want to feed on you. Oh, but I have discovered a wonderful new way of safely procuring blood.” She picked up a branch and started scribbling a magic circle into the dirt. “By combining healing magic with replication magic, I can replenish a person's lost blood. That way I can feed on the same person without harming them.”

Melaine layered a few more magic circles on top of the first one.

“Just multiplying someone's blood isn't enough, so I needed to

think of a way to use magic to control that blood as well. I thought necromancy might be effective on blood removed from the human body, the same way bones and flesh are, so I tried using that first. In the end, I came up with a combined healing-necromancy magic circle that looks like this!"

"Umm, we're not mages so we don't really understand what you're talking about..." Myurei replied, and Melaine snapped out of lecture mode.

"Oh yes, I forgot. My apologies. Veight was busy, and I really wanted to show someone my discovery..."

She blushed slightly, and Myurei's desire to have his blood sucked by this beautiful woman grew tenfold. Meanwhile, Ryuunie asked, "Is Veight really that busy?"

"Indeed. Gathering all the people and supplies he will need for his journey is taking a lot of time. Plus, he's worried about Airia. Vampires can't reproduce, so I don't really know what pregnancy is like, but it seems as though Airia is having a tough time."

Melaine rubbed her stomach as she said that, and Myurei found the gesture oddly seductive. On the other hand, Ryuunie didn't seem affected at all. *Ryuunie really is a cut above the rest of us, huh...* Myurei was starting to get a little scared of how superhuman Ryuunie was. As he stared at Melaine, he suddenly remembered that she had studied under the same master as Veight.

"Umm, Lady Melaine?"

"Yes?"

Myurei gathered his courage and asked, "E-Err, what was Lord Veight like as a child?"

"Hwuh?"

"Y-You see, he told me earlier that he was a brat when he was my age, and I was wondering if that was true."

Melaine rested her chin in her hands and considered how best to reply.

"Well, in some ways, he definitely was a brat."

"What do you mean?"

Annoyed, Melaine shouted, "He was way too smart! It was like he knew everything from the moment he started studying under Master!"

Melaine made a fist and waved it angrily in the air.

"I was his senior by almost a decade, but he kept showing me up! It just made me feel pathetic!"

"Umm, Lady Melaine, you're getting off-topic."

"Ah, sorry." Melaine composed herself and cleared her throat. "But, well, he really was smart even as a kid. Master learned a lot from him."

"The Demon Empress learned from *him*!?"

The Great Sage Gomoviroa was known across Meraldia as one of the wisest people alive. *If Lord Veight managed to teach someone like her new things, then there's no way he was just a brat!*

"I guess geniuses really are born special..."

Myurei had been motivated to improve after Veight praised him, but now he felt as though he would never be able to catch up to his teacher.

Melaine gave him a knowing smile and said, "I know how hard it is to be surrounded by geniuses. But there is something my Master said that has always stuck with me. 'Geniuses and Heroes are not the ones who shape the world. It is the amalgamation of average people who hold the most power.'"

"The amalgamation of...average people?"

"Yes. Average people like me and you." Melaine pointed to herself then Myurei.

"But you're not average at all, Lady Melaine!"

Not only was she far from average, but she wasn't even human.

Melaine smiled kindly and replied, "Thank you. Hearing you say that makes me feel as though all of my hard work was worth it."

"Huh?"

Melaine got to her feet and patted Myurei on the head.

"I was born a peasant, and when I became a vampire, I was one of the weakest of my clan. I couldn't fly or transform. I was so weak that consecrated silver didn't harm me—meaning, the holy metal didn't even register me as a vampire." Melaine chuckled as she looked off into the distance. "All the other vampires looked at me like I was a failure, but in the end, I was the only one who survived... Because no one suspected that I wasn't human."

Myurei remembered hearing from his grandfather that all of the vampires in Bernheinen had been made by Melaine. In other words, she was the de facto vampire queen, and the mother of all living vampires.

"I was the first of Master Gomoviroa's disciples, but all the students who came after kept surpassing me. It was unbelievably frustrating. But now, people like you think I'm a genius as well. I guess that proves I've come a lot further than I thought."

Myurei wasn't sure how to respond to that, but he could tell Melaine had put in a lot of effort to get to where she was.

Melaine put a finger to her lips and said with a playful smile, "Oh yes, you better not tell Veight or Parker what I said. If you do..." There was a devious twinkle in her eyes. "I'll turn you into a *vampire*."

"U-Understood!" Myurei bowed, while secretly thinking that might not be such a bad fate.

"Good luck with your studies, Myurei, Ryuunie."

The beautiful vampire queen quietly walked away. She didn't fly, or transform into a bat, but she also walked boldly underneath the light of the afternoon sun. As he watched her go, Myurei muttered, "So she's an average person, huh..."

"Did you say something?" Ryuunie asked.

"It's nothing. Come on, let's get back to studying."

"O-Okay."

Myurei smiled at Ryuunie and started walking back to the university.



The day before my departure, I went to visit Mao, who had just returned to Meraldia.

"I take it you're here to ask me to accompany you?" Mao asked with a wry smile, and I shook my head.

"I imagine you're too busy to come with me right now."

Mao was one of my most important links to Wa. I could have him deliver messages and documents that I didn't want remaining on official records. Sending a diplomat required going through the proper channels, but Mao was technically just a Wa-born Meraldian citizen.

"It's going to be hard to maneuver in Kuwol, so I've decided to only bring my werewolf squad with me. If anything happens to our ships, we'll be stranded on that continent, so I don't want to take too many important people with me."

"Ah... I see."

Why do you look so sad about that? Moving on to my reason for visiting, I said, "I came here today to ask if you would be willing to sell me some of your stock of Rolmund's precious stones."

"Gladly."

When Mao had come with me to Rolmund, he had bought up a ton of ore and jewels. He'd been able to buy them for cheap there, but here they were rare enough to be worth a fortune. As a result, he'd made a killing.

"Ideally, I'd like jewels that can't be mined in Kuwol. They don't have to be exceptionally high-quality or anything. In fact, even Meraldian jewels will work. Though, I imagine Kuwol's markets already have a decent supply of Meraldian jewelry."

"I see what you're after now," Mao said with a grin. He called one of his servants over and had them fetch a box from his storage room.

"This is a scalegem from Rolmund. You can't find them anywhere in Meraldia or Kuwol. There aren't any in Wa either, so it's a highly valuable jewel."

Mao opened the box to show me a dully gleaming aquamarine stone. There were stripes in its coloration, like a malachite or an agate, but the patterns were more complex. *I guess if you squint hard enough it does kind of look like a scale.*

Mao added, "It can be found everywhere in Rolmund, and even commoners use it to decorate their clothes. However, it sells for fifty times as much in Meraldia."

Holy crap.

"You scoundrel," I said with a knowing grin.

"Oh, please. No one had even heard of this stone before I

introduced it to Meraldia. I could have gotten away with charging a hundred times as much.”

Mao took my words as a compliment, and he smiled proudly. But while I did respect his mercantile spirit, he was going a bit overboard here. *I might need to knock him down a peg.*

“You’re still buying jewels from Rolmund’s merchants, aren’t you?”

Mao frowned and replied, “What gives you that idea?”

“Belken told me the soldiers guarding the tunnel in Krauhen have suddenly started wearing fancy clothes and spending large amounts of money.”

The tunnel in Krauhen connected to Rolmund. The first time I infiltrated Krauhen, Mao had bribed the soldiers guarding that tunnel. When Belken told me they mysteriously got their hands on a lot of money, my first suspect was, of course, Mao.

I grinned at him and said, “As a member of the Commonwealth Council, I’m obligated to tell Belken what I know.”

“H-Hold on a second. If those soldiers get punished, my reputation will be tarnished. I’ll give you as many scalegems as you want, so please don’t tell him.”

“Nah, I’ll at least pay what you did to buy them. But you better stop with the bribes.”

“Do I have to!?”

Look, you’re the one who’s at fault here. This wasn’t a problem with just Mao; most Meraladians had little respect for the law, which was why he had been able to bribe those soldiers so easily. However, I was used to Japan’s lack of corruption, so my decisions probably seemed heartless to Meraladians. Bribes were commonplace in Rolmund and Wa as well, so really it was a worldwide issue. However, if we didn’t rectify this trend, we would have huge problems later on.

“By the way, the name scalegem probably won’t impress the locals. When translating the name into Kuwolese you should probably make it something like ‘dragonscale gem.’”

“Oh, that’s not a bad idea.”

It was important to have an impressive name for your merchandise. Sighing, Mao started sifting through his box of scalegems.

“You’re right, I’m still in contact with Jivanki of Rolmund’s miner’s guild. I buy all of the scrap ore and cracked jewels he can’t sell in Rolmund. Scalegems with irregular patterns are basically worthless over there.”

Oh, that’s the guy I met when Parker summoned his skeleton army in the capital, isn’t it?

“Gems are small, light, and can’t spoil. Nobles also love parking

their assets in jewelry, and they make for convenient currency when making large-scale illegal transactions.”

“Is that really something you should be telling the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander?”

Strictly speaking, trading with Rolmund as a private citizen wasn’t illegal, but if he kept telling me all this, I’d catch him doing something truly shady sooner or later. I promised Mao I’d bring back some of Kuwol’s precious stones for him, then returned to my office. I also had him teach me the trade routes he was using in Rolmund in case I needed them. *Thank god I have such evil friends.*

I could have just taken money from the council’s coffers to fund my expedition, but then I would have to justify myself to Airia later. It was only now that she was Demon Lord that I realized what a blessing it had been that the Demon Lords before her didn’t care for economics. Well, it wasn’t a blessing for the nation, but it was a blessing for me. Either way, thanks to Mao’s contribution, I now had a war chest for my Kuwol campaign. It cost an arm and a leg to feed a squad of werewolves, so I definitely needed the money.

I tasked the newly formed unit of Demon Knights to protect Ryunheit while we were gone. They weren’t as strong as my werewolves, but they were among the best human soldiers in Meraldia. Airia would be safe in their hands—especially since they were under her direct command. I could take my entire werewolf squad without worrying about Ryunheit’s defenses now. *Man, everything is so much less stressful when you’re not chronically short-handed. We definitely need to spend more on training bureaucrats and career soldiers.* The company I worked for in my last life met a grisly end precisely because they didn’t do that.

The next morning, we all gathered in front of Airia so she could see us off. She was flanked by her maids, and a platoon of Demon Knights stood behind her.

“Your Majesty, I, your humble vice-commander, shall now head to Kuwol with my fifty-six werewolves and restore order to the nation.”

I saluted, and the werewolves behind me followed suit.

She nodded and replied, “I pray you have a safe journey.”

Airia’s morning sickness had just begun to pass, and her stomach wasn’t bulging yet. At a glance, it was hard to tell she was even pregnant. I wanted to play out that clichéd scene of placing a hand on her stomach and commenting on how the baby was doing, but it seemed I wouldn’t be able to do that just yet. *Why did you have to start a civil war, you stupid king? I finally get a chance to be a father in this life and you’re forcing me to come wipe your ass.*

Airia must have read my thoughts, since she smiled awkwardly

and said, “The sooner you resolve this crisis the sooner you can come home, right?”

She was absolutely correct. I needed to put my personal feelings behind and focus on helping the king so I could come home. Blushing, I nodded to her and said, “It’s as you say. I shall endeavor to return to you as soon as possible.”

Worried, Airia added, “I do want you home soon, but please don’t do anything reckless.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Why am I not reassured by that?”

Some of the werewolves snickered behind me, and I struggled to keep a straight face.

“Very well, I promise I shall at least come back in one piece, like I always have.”

“That only makes me more worried!”

The snickering behind me got louder. I scratched my head awkwardly and whispered so that only Airia could hear, “Don’t worry, I won’t die and leave my child fatherless.”

“Mmmm... Alright, I’ll believe you.”

Airia smiled bashfully at me, and this time her maids started snickering. *I really wish you’d have more faith in me, Airia.*

* * * *

—The Demon Lord’s Lament—

Half a month has passed since Veight departed. He should be reaching Kuwol around now, which means I should be hearing from him in a few weeks. If he doesn’t write, he’ll have hell to pay when he comes back.

“I hope the seas were calm during his voyage...”

I’m feeling a little better than usual today. My morning sickness has been completely gone for a few days now, and I pray it stays that way. Now that I can finally think clearly, I’ve started processing paperwork again. As I sift through documents, I let out a small sigh. The Commonwealth Council’s treasury remains in dire straits, as it was before. The Senate’s battle with the demon army, and the following standoff between northern and southern Meraldia drained our economy considerably. We lowered taxes to help the various industries recover, but because of that, we’re running out of money to invest in city infrastructure.

This isn’t the worst of it, either. In order to implement all the policies the demon army is suggesting, we will need to expand their budget considerably. First of all, they want to build schools to raise the average education level of Meraldian citizens, and train skilled

bureaucrats to help run the government more efficiently. They also want to revamp our public health system and start researching new treatment methods for diseases. Plus, they want money for weapon research and development. Lastly, they want money to establish new trade routes and look for new nations to build trade relationships with. *And* they want to reform our currency and legislative system.

All of these are good plans that will help Meraldia in the long term, but they also require budgets which will be draining our treasury in the short term as well. The man behind all of these proposals is, of course, Veight Von Aindorf, my husband. Under normal circumstances I would never agree to allocate funds for such far-reaching plans, but I know my husband comes from a world that is far more advanced than ours. He was raised in an advanced society and studied an immense amount of history. He brushed off his knowledge by saying “It’s like cheating on a test because you looked up all the answers beforehand, so it’s not like I’m the one who’s smart or anything.” Regardless of how he came to possess his knowledge, though, the fact remains that it will be indispensable to Meraldia. He knows what direction the world will move in, what the future holds, and what we need to do to prepare for the difficulties we will eventually face. I’m not giving him preferential treatment because I love him. I sincerely do believe that as the leader of Meraldia, I need to give his proposals careful consideration.

“Which means I’m going to have to find a lot of money.”

Since I came from a merchant family, I had a good grasp of the scale of Meraldia’s market. It wasn’t possible to raise the money we needed from the domestic market alone. On the other hand, Meraldia’s luxury goods fetched high prices in foreign markets. Moreover, we regularly had large surpluses on our grain harvests and an excess of handicrafts from Veira, so we needed to find buyers for those as well. Ashley also mentioned that Meraldia’s agricultural production would increase exponentially in the coming years thanks to his research.

“Hence we need Kuwol...”

Wa produced a lot of goods we wanted to import, but it was too small a country to serve as an export market. No matter how you sliced it, we needed a stable Kuwol so we could offload our surplus produce.

“Hmmm.”

At some point, I realize I’m talking to myself aloud. Normally, Veight is around to bounce ideas off of, but right now he’s a continent away. Once again, he’s not by my side. I rub my slightly protruding belly. This office feels so empty without him.

In truth, I didn’t want to let him go to Kuwol. Unfortunately, he’s

the only person who understands how vital Kuwol is to Meraldia's future, and what the current situation in Kuwol is. No one else would be able to do as good a job.

"According to Veight, that country is on the precipice of disaster."

I filed away my paperwork and took a small notebook out of my secret drawer. The notebook was filled with notes written by the both of us.

"Agricultural production increases → Fewer farmers are needed to feed the population → Industrial sector grows."

"Standardization → Industrialization → Modernization → Imperialism."

"Raising the average education level → Increase in skilled laborers."

As I trace the letters with my fingers, I think back to when Veight lectured me about his world. It was difficult to grasp everything he said, but it was the most stimulating lesson I ever experienced.

"I doubt anyone living in today's era will be able to predict that this is how the future will unfold."

No matter what he says, I still think my husband is an amazing man, and I'm proud of him—which is exactly why I desperately want him to come back safe and sound. All of Meraldia needs him, but more importantly, our unborn child and I need him.

I look forlornly out the south-facing window. "Last time you were north of me, this time you went south."

I sigh again as I think back to when he went to Rolmund. That man always makes those closest to him worry. Gomoviroa mentioned that as well, and now I understand what she meant. He really is an awful vice-commander.

"Normally, vice-commanders don't personally head to the front lines anytime a problem arises..."

After this expedition ends, I'm never letting him escape my clutches ever again. I swear on my name as the third Demon Lord that I'll keep him by my side forever.

* * * *

My men kept teasing me about Airia during the entire trip to Beluza. Upon arriving, I immediately went to Garsh's manor. We kept our pleasantries brief and the viceroy quickly led us to the galley he'd outfitted for the voyage. After everyone was on board, I waved farewell to Garsh and ordered the captain to set sail.

"Everyone's here, let's go!"

"Aye, aye, sir! You heard the bossman. Weigh anchor!"

"The sails are ready, Captain!"

"Start rowing, you louts! No slacking or I'll throw you overboard!"

Sailors started running to and fro, making sure everything was in order. I was planning on having my werewolves help with the rowing, so the journey would hopefully take less time than usual. The sooner I ended this stupid civil war, the sooner I could return home. Deciding my kid's name was a far more important task than some foreign country's issues.

In the days it took for us to reach Bahza, I gave my werewolves a crash course in Kuwolese. By the time we reached the bustling port, they were able to make simple conversation.

As I gazed out at the city I explained in an offhand manner, "In Kuwolese they don't call it the 'Mejire River.' The word Mejire means 'large river' and it's the only large river in the country, so it's just called Mejire."

To the Kuwol people, saying "Mejire River" sounded like saying Mt. Fuji Mountain or Nile River River. They considered the river sacred, so I wanted to make sure I afforded it the proper respect in my conversations with them. Meraldians just saw it as a muddy river, but to the Kuwolese, it was a liquid moonbeam that flowed directly from the holy moon.

Kuwolese shared a lot of grammar and vocabulary with Meraldian, though it wasn't as similar as Rolmundian. Meraldian and Rolmundian were as close as American and British English, but Kuwolese was about as removed as French was from English. It required a bit of practice, but it was still easier to pick up than a totally unrelated language like Arabic. This world was similar to Earth—in that all of humanity shared a common ancestor. Once things settled down, I really wanted to spend some time researching this world's anthropology.

I filed those musings away for later and started telling my werewolves all the things they needed to watch out for. Kuwol's manners and forms of address were vastly different from Meraldia's.

"When you introduce yourself to someone, you have to give them your father's name as well. There are some southern Meraldians who do that too, so I imagine you're familiar with the idea."

A lot of cultures seemed to have a custom of mentioning your parents' names when introducing yourself. In close-knit communities, most people knew each other by proxy, so mentioning your relatives helped establish that connection.

"There are a few other minor things that people do differently here so if you don't know what to do, ask me or Grizz's guys about it."

"Whatever you say, boss," Monza replied lazily.

"I don't really get what you're saying, but sure," Nibert said with a confused look on his face. *Are these guys really gonna be okay?*

Bahza's port had a very different atmosphere than Beluza's or

Lotz's.

"Is it just me, or is this place kinda dingy-looking?" Jerrick muttered.

"I think it might be because the port is north-facing," I replied thoughtfully.

All of Meraldia's ports opened southward, so they got a lot of sunshine throughout the day. Meanwhile, Bahza's port opened to the north, and the tall buildings blocked a lot of sunlight. It gave the pier a rather forlorn appearance.

"I thought a southern nation would be a lot livelier, but..." Fahn trailed off in disappointment, and we all nodded.

This definitely wasn't what we were expecting. The one thing that did meet expectations was the heat. Bahza was significantly warmer than even Beluza. It was early spring back in Meraldia, but here it felt like summer. Most of the buildings were made of brick and painted white to help keep them cool. Timber was a rare resource in Kuwol, and was used mainly for building ships and harbors.

A guide rowed up to us in a small boat and directed the captain toward a pier that the ruler of Bahza had set aside for Meraldian ships. Upon disembarking, we found a petite old woman waiting for us at the dock, wearing a Kuwol-style hempen dress. She spoke to us in surprisingly fluent Meraldian.

"My, you certainly brought quite a retinue. I take it you are Lord Veight?"

"Yes, I am. Who might you be?"

The old woman smiled and put a hand over her mouth.

"Oh, my apologies, I forgot to introduce myself. I rarely ever have to, you see."

The woman straightened her back and said in a commanding voice, "I am descended from the line of Shamar, Mafdan's daughter, Birakoya."

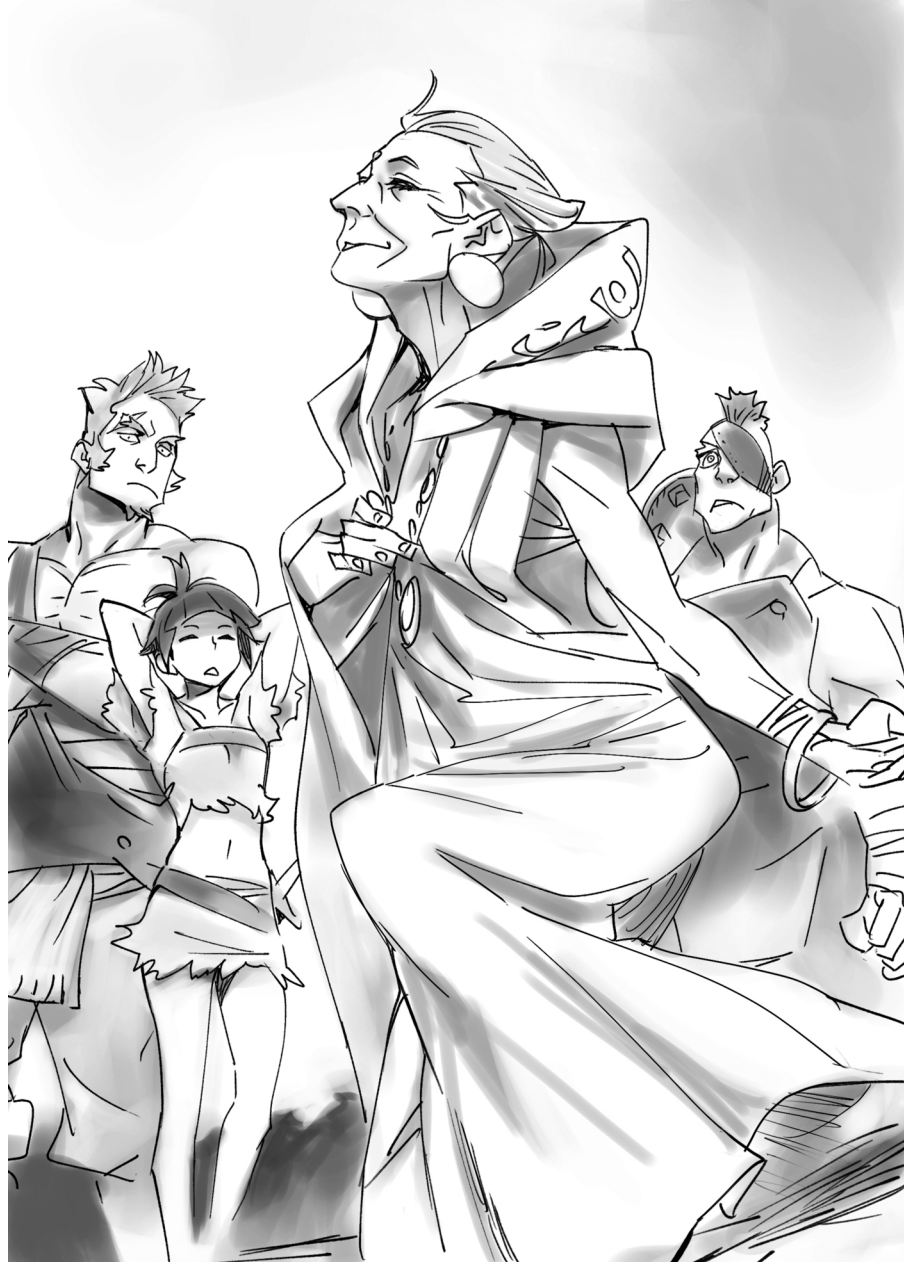
I recognized that name. This woman was Bahza's ruler.

"I am so sorry for not recognizing you immediately, Lord Bahza. Allow me to properly introduce myself. I am Veight Von Aindorf, a Meraldian councilor. Hey guys, kneel!"

It was customary in Kuwol to kneel on your right knee when greeting a noble. I started to kneel as well, but Birakoya held up a hand to stop me.

"Oh no, there is no need for that. You are the Meraldian queen's husband, are you not? If so, you outrank me by far."

Smiling, Birakoya got down on one knee and bowed to me.



“As the representative of the coastal noble coalition, I welcome you to Kuwol, Lord Veight. Feel free to call me Granny Birakoya.”

“I could never do something so rude!”

“It’s what all the children of Bahza call me. But if you prefer not to, I shan’t force you.”

Birakoya certainly acted like a friendly old lady, so it wouldn’t surprise me if her subjects really did call her that. She reminded me a little of Master, honestly. Of course, it was possible her friendly demeanor was just an act to get me to lower my guard, too. *I need to stay vigilant.*

Right as I was thinking that, a group that appeared to be Birakoya’s personal guard started running over to her. They consisted of both men and women. All wore chainmail and had identical scimitars belted at their waists. They were shouting panickedly in Kuwolese, but it wasn’t too hard to make out what they were saying.

“Ah, there’s Granny Birakoya! Over here, guys!”

“How many times do we have to tell you not to go off on your own!?”

“Jeez! Will you stop leaving us behind!?”

Oh? The guards formed a protective circle around Birakoya. Though she was their lord, they really were treating her like family. She smiled ruefully and put a hand to her cheek.

“I’m sorry. But when I saw Lord Veight’s ship approaching I simply couldn’t contain my curiosity.”

“And we’re telling you that’s dangerous! We’re in the middle of a war, remember!? Have you already forgotten that our port was sabotaged the other day!?”

“Bahza would collapse if anything happened to you, Granny!”

Maybe everyone really does treat her like their grandmother? No, no, no. This has to be part of the act, too. Diplomacy is all about deception. ...I think. Even though I was still suspicious, I couldn’t help but relax a little as I watched everyone fawn over Birakoya.

After a few seconds, she clapped her hands and said, “You can worry about me later. For now, guide our fine Meraldian guests to their lodgings. They must be tired from the long journey.”

“Understood, ma’am.”

The guards looked like they wanted to keep lecturing Birakoya, but they respected her enough to follow her orders it seemed. They saluted crisply and led my werewolves away to an inn. Fahn’s squad was on bodyguard duty today so they stayed behind with me.

“Shall we be off then, Lord Veight?”

“Lead the way, Lady Birakoya.”

Even if she was as amicable as she appeared, now wasn’t the time

to be making friends. I had work to do.

Birakoya led me to a stately mansion that overlooked the port and ushered me into a meeting room.

“The situation has gotten too complicated for my liking,” she said with a sigh as we both sat down. “But know that I am grateful Meraldia has continued to support us even after civil war broke out. Give Garshey my thanks for me when you get back. His soldiers have been a huge help.”

“*Garshey?*” *Seriously?*

“He’s the spitting image of his father, you know. Stubborn to a fault, loves to act tough, but is actually surprisingly cautious... He even talks like Grasco.”

You said it. Birakoya was good friends with Petore, and she’d been quite close to Garsh’s father before he passed away as well.

Apparently, the three of them had been playmates as kids, and had gotten up to all sorts of mischief together.

“Every time those two came to visit, they caused a mess in my city.”

Oh yeah, I can totally see that. Bahza wasn’t the city that had deep connections to Beluza and Lotz. Every coastal city in Kuwol was friends with Beluza and Lotz. In fact, Petore was famous in Kuwol for all the crazy stunts he’d pulled here in his youth.

“One time, he gathered all of Bahza’s sailors and launched a massive raid on the pirates who sailed these waters. He captured three ships and brought them back to the port.”

“I’m surprised that it didn’t turn into an international incident.”

He may have done Bahza a service by eliminating pirates, but both the pirates he’d killed and the sailors he’d recruited were Kuwolese citizens. Normally, it wouldn’t be proper for a Meraldian to lead Kuwolese in battle against their own countrymen.

Birakoya’s eyes glazed over a little, and she said, “The only reason it didn’t was because my father went and personally apologized to all the other nobles.”

“I’m so sorry for what my fellow councilor has done,” I said, bowing my head. *Goddammit Petore, you’re making me apologize for stuff you did before I was even born!* One of the worst things about my job was that I had to take responsibility for things that were totally not my fault. Fortunately, Birakoya just grinned and shook her head.

“Don’t be. I had a lot of fun spending time with Petore. Besides, it’s thanks to him that we have so few pirates now.”

“If you say so...”

“It would be nice to go back to those times. I miss throwing Grasco into the sea and dropping sails on Petore’s head.”

This tiny old lady did all that? Well, I guess you've gotta be at least this strong to survive as the ruler of a city. Though, to my Japanese sensibilities, everyone in this world was tough—from emperors to peasants. As I engaged in small talk, I thought about why Birakoya was bringing these stories up in particular. *Is she trying to emphasize how strong her ties to Meraldia are?* I was a newcomer to Kuwol. I didn't know how these people negotiated normally, and chances were they were on guard because they knew I was a demon. Meraldia wanted to stay in Birakoya's good graces, so I definitely wanted to convince her I meant no harm.

Choosing my words carefully, I said, "The demon army highly values the relationship Kuwol's coastal nobles have cultivated with Meraldia. I swear that we will do our best to aid you as allies and friends."

"My, my..." Birakoya murmured, seemingly content that I had said what she wanted me to say. Her lips curled up into a mischievous grin and she said, "Was my begging a little too obvious?"

"Oh no, not at all," I replied with a wry smile. For some reason, I got soft when dealing with old women. *Maybe it's because I've spent so much time with Master...*

Relieved, Birakoya said, "I admit I became rather nervous when I heard you were a demon, Lord Veight, but you seem no different than my sons or grandsons. It's strange, I've only just met you, but I feel as though we can get along."

"It's an honor to hear you say that. Honestly, I feel like I've known you for ages as well, Lady Birakoya."

We were both just being polite, but there was a kernel of truth in my words. I hoped the same was true for Birakoya. *Now then, it's about time we got down to business.*

I started off by asking Birakoya what she thought of the attack on Bahza's port that ended up being the catalyst for the civil war.

"Personally, I doubt that attack was orchestrated by His Majesty. The law grants him the authority to punish treasonous nobles however he pleases, so he would have no need for a covert night strike like this," Birakoya explained.

"I agree completely. According to the reports I received, the assault achieved no strategic purpose either."

The only damage Bahza had sustained was two half-burnt warehouses and one damaged wooden crane. Of course, the owners of those warehouses had suffered a huge blow, but it hadn't hurt the coastal nobles' war potential in the slightest.

Birakoya nodded and replied, "With how small-scale the assault was, I suspect the culprit is someone else. However, I still believe

bringing our unruly king in line is our biggest priority.”

It sounded like Birakoya was more than happy to go along with the culprit’s script and take the fight to the king. *She’s one hell of a granny, that’s for sure. I’ve never seen anyone so eager to beat the shit out of someone.*

“So you plan on putting the search for the culprit on hold?”

Birakoya’s smile vanished, and she let out a small sigh. “If I probe too deeply and find out this was instigated by exactly who we both suspect, what do you think will happen to the coastal nobles’ alliance?”

So she, too, suspected that a fellow coastal noble had instigated this to give the alliance a pretext to attack. If that truly was the case and the truth came to light, the other coastal nobles would undoubtedly shun the culprit, and the king would have a valid excuse to intervene in their affairs.

“Yes, I suppose the only person who stands to gain from the truth coming to light is Kuwol’s king.”

“Precisely, Lord Veight. Do you believe my decision to be a foolish one?”

“Not at all. I know too well that war is something that cannot be started and stopped at will.”

Most of the wars I’d experienced in this world had been completely unnecessary. Kuwol’s civil war wasn’t much different, but it was better in the sense that I could at least see a clear way for it to end. All the coastal nobles needed to do was strike terror into the king’s heart and forcefully drag him to the negotiating table. I didn’t like how high the casualty rate was getting in order to achieve that goal, but there wasn’t much I could do about that. This wasn’t my country, after all.

Birakoya brought out a map of the nation and trailed her finger along the Mejire. She stopped at a town just north of Encaraga, the capital.

“According to the latest report from my soldiers, our mercenary vanguard is currently sieging the city of Karfal.”

“So you’re almost to the capital.”

“Yes, our mercenaries are performing exceptionally well. Of course, it helps that we already signed covert treaties with a number of our enemies.”

“I see.”

I knew some of the inland nobles were on the coastal nobles’ side. I needed specifics though.

“Lady Birakoya, exactly how many of the cities in your path do you have prior agreements with?”

“They are technically secret treaties so I’m afraid I cannot disclose

them to you, but suffice to say the majority is on our side.”

Damn, she's good. Of course, I knew this grand alliance hadn't been created through Birakoya Bahza's efforts alone, but the fact that together with her supporters she had won over the majority of her enemies was still impressive. *She's probably made a few secret deals with some of Meraldia's viceroys too, huh...* So long as she didn't do anything to endanger Meraldia's people, I was willing to let those deals slide.

“However, there are a few nobles who are too stubborn to see reason. As for them, we have no choice but to subjugate them with force.”

It was scary how casually Birakoya talked about annihilating those who didn't cooperate with her. She sounded like she was talking about the weather. *Man, grannies are scary.*

On the other hand, the king she was up against was a hot-headed moron who didn't know the first thing about politics. He was doomed.

One of Birakoya's attendants entered the room and said, “Milady, Sir Kumluk is here requesting an audience.”

“My, now that's rare.”

Birakoya cocked her head, but then she smiled.

“Kumluk is the vice-commander of Bahza's mercenary force. He has been fighting on the front lines until now, so I wonder what brought him back to Bahza.”

“He says he wishes to meet with the famous Lord Veight... Should I turn him away?”

The vice-commander of Bahza's mercenaries, you say? Sounds like someone I should be wary of. I hid my true feelings behind a smile and said, “I don't mind meeting with him, Lady Birakoya. After all, my job as a diplomat is to speak with as many people as possible.”

“My, how courteous of you. In that case, I suppose there's no problem. Let him in.”

Birakoya turned to the attendant, who bowed and hurried out of the room. A few seconds later I could hear the sound of armor clanking as Kumluk approached.

“My apologies for intruding on your meeting,” he said in accented Meraldian as he stepped into the room. Kumluk was a well-built swarthy man in his late twenties. He was wearing a surcoat over his armor, probably to prevent it from cooking in the hot Kuwol sun. Honestly, the surcoat looked kind of cool. *I guess even mercenaries wear fancy armor once they make it up to vice-commander status.*

“Kumluk, please introduce yourself to Lord Veight,” Birakoya gently chided.

“Yes, ma'am!”

Kumluk knelt on his right knee and bowed his head to me.

“I am Kumluk, Haluam’s son. I currently serve as the Bahza mercenary company’s vice-commander.”

He had the manners of a noble, and he carried himself with dignity. On top of that, he knew Meraldian. It was obvious he was no mere mercenary. I inclined my head and introduced myself.

“I am Veight Von Aindorf, Vice-Commander to Meraldia’s Demon Lord. I hope we can get along as fellow vice-commanders.”

“L-Likewise!” Kumluk squeaked, bowing his head even lower. He was a lot more timid than he looked.

Noticing my reaction, Birakoya explained, “Kumluk is the fourth son of one Bahza’s most wealthy merchants. He used to visit me frequently, but a few years ago he said he wanted to live by the sword and became a mercenary.”

“It’s rather embarrassing, but I have no talent for business, so I chose this path instead,” Kumluk mumbled, his face bright red. If he was a merchant’s son, that meant he knew how to read, write, and do basic math. It also explained why he knew Meraldian—all of which were useful qualities in a vice-commander. From what I could tell, it wasn’t that he lacked business talent; he was just too shy to be a good merchant. Of course, I was basing that off of first impressions, so I could be wrong.

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. You’ve grown into a fine young man, Kumluk. It is thanks to you that Bahza’s mercenaries are so disciplined.”

“Oh no, I have nothing to do with that! It’s all thanks to Captain Zagar’s leadership. I haven’t done anything at all...”

“My, my. I see your timid nature hasn’t changed.”

Wow, those two are pretty close. Listening to their exchange, I began to suspect that Birakoya had pushed for Kumluk to become a mercenary, and it wasn’t wholly his idea. She was his trusted insider in Bahza’s mercenary company, and he could help her keep them in check if necessary. Again, this was just my impression. I couldn’t be sure of anything. Kumluk wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead and took a letter out of his pocket.

“A-Anyway, the captain told me to deliver this message to you.”

“I see. Excuse me for a moment, Lord Veight.”

Birakoya accepted the letter and took a decorated magnifying lens out of her desk drawer. It appeared to be a substitute for glasses.

“Oh dear... Oh my...”

Once she was done, she turned back to me.

“The mercenaries have taken Karfal already. *Before* our regular army could arrive to back them up.”

I had a very bad feeling about this, but Kumluk was right there so I just smiled and said, “I see they’re quite skilled. Well done, Sir

Kumluk.”

“It’s all thanks to Captain Zagar. He’s amazing.”

You’ve been bringing this Captain Zagar up a lot, but who exactly is this guy?

“I take it Sir Zagar is the leader of your mercenary troupe? What kind of man is he?”

The moment I asked that, Kumluk’s face lit up.

“He’s an exemplary commander! Not only is he popular with his men, but he’s unbelievably strong, too. He’s also the only commander who has experience waging land wars. He’s especially good at carrying out sieges.”

Birakoya held out a hand to silence Kumluk and took over explaining. “Traditionally, we have not taught our officers land warfare tactics. Our neighbors might see it as an act of aggression, or even treason.”

“I see. So Zagar is indispensable to your army.” If they hadn’t trained any other soldiers in land warfare, that meant they really hadn’t planned on attacking initially.

Birakoya gave me a suggestive look and said, “I have heard that you are quite skilled at land warfare as well, Lord Veight. Did you not slaughter an army of four hundred with just fifty men?”

She was probably referring to the time Thuvan had tried to invade Ryunheit.

I smiled wanly and shook my head. “The stories you have heard are exaggerated. I only won that battle because I had a separate force launch an ambush.”

“An ambush, you say?”

Seemingly impressed, Birakoya turned back to Kumluk and asked, “What do you make of his tactics?”

“He seems quite experienced in the ways of war. Lord Veight, it would be an honor if you would be willing to come to the front lines with us. You don’t have to fight; just observing our battles would be enough.”

I’m telling you guys, those stories are exaggerated. Please don’t look at me like that! I’d had the basics of strategy drilled into me when I first joined the demon army, but I was only good at commanding small forces, and they had to be werewolves for me to really know what to do. Humans were fragile and died easily, so I didn’t know how to command them properly. However, both Birakoya and Kumluk seemed to believe I was some kind of War God who could lead them to victory.

“You prevented the empire to the north from invading Meraldia as well, did you not? I heard you even managed to take the empire’s princess prisoner.”

“I... Well...yes, but...”

I couldn't explain myself properly since the reason I was able to win was a military secret. Birakoya's eyes sparkled like an excited young girl, and she added, “You're quite literally as strong as a thousand men, aren't you!? You even defeated a Valkaan!”

“What is a Valkaan?”

“In Kuwolese it means ‘War God.’ I think in Meraldian you call them...Heroes? Yes, Heroes. Warriors who possess the power of a god.”

Ahhhh, I see. Now how am I going to explain this one? Kumluk was looking expectantly at me as well.

“If you defeated a War God, that means you're one too, right!?”

“The one I beat was already on the verge of death. It was the Demon Lord of two generations ago who defeated him, I simply dealt the finishing blow.”

Regardless of what people said, I knew that Friedensrichter was the one who won that fight, not me. But Birakoya wasn't aware of all the details, so she thought I was just being humble.

“Lady Birakoya, I am honored to be in the presence of such a great man. The Demon Lord's Vice-Commander is probably akin to an army all on his own.”

“Indeed. Petore said he lacked the ships to send a large army, but I suppose we will not be needing one if we have an ally as powerful as Lord Veight. How reassuring.”

Please stop treating me like a walking tactical nuke.

* * * *

—Lord Bahza's Tidings—

Are you doing well, Petore? Still taking good care of your wife, I hope. How many years has it been since we last met? You were still feuding with the Senate back then. We've reached the age where I'm beginning to worry you might be called to Mondstrahl's side any day now, but I know you're a fighter, so you'll probably be alive and kicking for another decade or two. Besides, you did promise to outlive me during Grasco's funeral. I still remember how tenderly you were holding Garshey back then.

That aside, I can't believe you sent us the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander. I thought Meraldia wasn't interested in getting too involved with this war. However, I am glad you loaned us such a powerful ally. Thank you. All of the coastal nobles are heartened by the aid you've sent us.

Now that Lord Veight is here, the king will no longer be able to ignore our demands. I shall send a messenger to him at once. I have

no doubt he's shaking in his boots right now, so he should acquiesce.

By the way, Veight really is an interesting fellow. His smile is sincere, and he's rather polite. He is exactly the man you claimed he was, and more. He treated me the same way before and after learning my identity, and as far as I can tell, he's a man of his word. I see now why you and Garshey put your faith in him. Oh yes, he brought a few rare gemstones known as dragonscale gems as a gift for us. Apparently, they can only be mined in the empire to the north. I'm thinking of making a necklace out of them.

Come to think of it, what did you guys bring me as gifts when you first met me? I recall you brought me the head of a pirate king... Or was it a rare shark fin? It must have been one of the two because I distinctly remember the maids complaining about the stench. You looked so proud of yourself when you presented your gift to me. Thinking back on it now, it's a rather fond memory.

I must say, despite having a far more illustrious war record than you, Veight is far less belligerent than either you or Grasco ever were. He acts more like a bureaucrat than a general, but occasionally you can tell that a hardened warrior lurks beneath the surface, like an eagle hiding its talons. Did he truly defeat a War God? He's so docile, but at the same time, he's imposing enough that I would believe it. We're all excited to see just how strong he really is, especially the mercenaries. It'd be nice to see him and his men transform too. I'm sure I'd never forget the sight of it.

Regardless, thank you again for sending such a reliable ally. I always knew you treasured your friends, even if you act prickly at times. If only you weren't normally such a deadbeat... Actually, forget I said that. When are you coming to visit? You haven't been to Bahza in ages. We miss the sight of you sailing in on your massive warship, arms folded at the prow. All the maids still laugh about how weird your ship's figurehead is.

You'd better visit at least once. Neither of us is long for this world, and I don't want to die without seeing your face again. Anyway, I'll try to settle this pointless civil war while I'm still alive. I don't want my grandkids inheriting this quarrel we started.

* * * *

In the end, I got roped into going to the front lines with Kumluk. I needed to look for Parker anyway, so it wasn't too bad a deal for me. Since he'd been sent in as my secret agent, he was officially just another soldier, and Kuwol definitely wouldn't expend any effort to find him. If he was in trouble, I was the only one who could save him. Granted, if someone pushed him too far and caused him to go berserk, he'd easily be able to crush a few cities all on his own. That would

destroy everything I was working toward, so I wanted to avoid that at all costs. Which is why I only pretended to put up any resistance and easily acquiesced to Birakoya's request.

"Alright, alright. In order to emphasize our alliance, I'll take my werewolves and a few of Grizz's men to join your army."

Ultimately, I just wanted to show off that Meraldia was allied with the coastal nobles. If possible, I wanted to avoid getting into any fights. It would also be easier to pressure the king to surrender if I could speak to him directly as a messenger from the Meraldian Commonwealth. Also, I needed to find Parker and rescue him if he was in trouble. He was almost as excited to see my kid's face as I was, so I needed to take him back with me.

I took almost all of my werewolves with me, leaving behind only a single squad to serve as my messengers, since they could deliver reports way faster than humans. I also took a few of Beluza's landing troops with me. It was mostly to pad out our numbers, but I also wanted to ask them about the kinds of places Parker had been visiting and what he'd been doing before he went missing.

When I told as much to Grizz he stroked his unkempt beard and said, "Parker was pretty much the same as always before he disappeared. He was cracking those god-awful jokes of his and all."

I'm sorry you had to suffer through those.

"But yeah, he wasn't acting strange or anything. Only thing I can really think of was that he was really wary of the mercenaries? But he told you that in his report as well."

"I see."

Despite his usual clown act, Parker was way smarter than me. It was quite possible that he discovered something dangerous about the mercenaries and went into hiding. There was no way these chumps could best him, so he probably hadn't been captured. What Grizz said next was far more intriguing.

"Oh yeah, do you know what a War God is?"

"They're basically the kinds of people Meraldia calls Heroes, right?"

"Yeah. Parker was investigating them right before he went missing. This is what he wrote up so far. It's unfinished, but he told us to give it to you anyway if he didn't come back for a while."

Grizz handed me a thick sheaf of documents. According to his report, War Gods, which were basically Heroes or Demon Lords, had appeared quite frequently throughout Kuwol's history. There were numerous legends, books and epic poems about the various War Gods' exploits. Of course, it was unlikely all the stories were true, but if even half of them were based in fact, it meant Kuwol had a hell of a lot of Heroes.

Parker had organized all the accounts in a chronological table, and it looked like a War God had appeared at least once every few years in the past. The list was over 50 names long. However, the list ended after a certain date, and it seemed no War Gods had appeared in Kuwol since then. That date happened to be just a little bit before the current Kuwol monarchy was established. Parker's hypothesis was that the disappearance of War Gods was what allowed the nation to finally stabilize and form a central government. *Man, when Parker's taking his job seriously, he's way better at it than me.*

If he was always this serious, I would have recommended him for the position of the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, but unfortunately, his mental state was a lot more fragile than he let on. Apparently, the reason Parker had gone inland was to try and learn what had caused the War Gods to stop appearing—but of course, the moment he'd left, the civil war had broken out—and now, I was heading to the royal capital. It was possible this was all a coincidence, but I suspected someone was behind this. It just reeked of shady dealings.

"I just hope he didn't go further upriver than the capital..."

"Well, all the cities on the way to Encaraga are under the coastal nobles' control, so if he hasn't, he should be able to make it back easily..." Grizz said, running a hand through his mohawk.

If Parker went in too deep, I wouldn't be able to send out a search party, but at the same time, I couldn't mobilize the military just to look for my friend. *Dammit. Most of the time, I don't even want to see his face. But now that he's gone, I can't stop thinking about him.*

As I traveled up the Mejire, I took a close look at the cities on the way to Karfal. Just as Birakoya Bahza had claimed, the nobles ruling most of them had signed treaties with her alliance already. They were completely intact, untouched by the ravages of war. Moreover, the rulers of the cities greeted us with open arms—making it clear that they weren't interested in fighting. Considering they were the victims in this dispute between the king and the coastal nobles, it made sense that they wanted to stay as uninvolved as possible.

The flags fluttering from the cities' castle towers were the only indication that these guys had even been at war. They were flags of the Mejire River, known here as Streamers. They signified that the city was willing to "go with the flow;" meaning that it had surrendered. Assaulting a location that was flying Streamers was against the law. Likewise, it was against the law for a city that had raised Streamers to send its troops outside its walls.

Monza looked up at the Streamers with a frown and muttered, "They should have beat these guys up some more. Why are humans so half-assed about things?"

"I mean, even werewolves don't fight someone who's baring their

stomach. If humans didn't have some way of signaling surrender, they'd end up fighting until one side was completely wiped out."

Unfortunately, humans broke the laws they set all the time. There were countless cases of a side surrendering, but the victors slaughtering everyone anyway. Fortunately, it seemed this war was civil for now. Even so, I had no doubt Kuwol's king was panicking. Since he wasn't aware of all the secret treaties that had been made, it probably seemed to him that the coastal alliance was unstoppable.

Soon enough, I made it to Karfal. Unlike the other cities, it had seen significant fighting. The walls were in shambles, with many of the buildings already collapsed. The area around the castle gates had been practically leveled, and I could see downtrodden citizens picking their way through the rubble. There were mass graves all over the place as well. It seemed quite a few people had died.

"Holy hell, what happened here?"

"This is overkill..."

"How many years will it take to repair this..."

Grizz and his men muttered darkly to each other as they surveyed the damage. Kumluk, who'd gone on ahead of our party, ran over to us, flanked by a retinue of mercenary guards.

"Lord Veight!"

"Ah, Sir Kumluk. I see your mercenaries dealt quite a blow to this city."

He gave me an apologetic look and replied, "I'm sorry. We wanted to bring the battle to a close as fast as possible, so—"

A soldier wearing a fancy cape walked over, interrupting Kumluk.

"Kumluk, are these the reinforcements from Meraldia?"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

Kumluk hurriedly turned around and bowed to the soldier. He was about the same age as the vice-commander, but he looked far more imposing. Beneath his fancy cape he wore a fine suit of armor. His scimitar's scabbard was studded with jewels, but the weapon's hilt itself was practical and unadorned. From the looks of it, the scimitar had seen quite a bit of use, too.

The man kept his center of gravity low and moved with the measured grace of a pro athlete. He walked over to me and gave me a slight bow rather than kneeling.

"It is an honor to meet you, Lord Veight! I am Jakarn's son, Zagar, the captain of Bahza's mercenaries!"

Liar. I could smell the falsehood on him. Jakarn had been Kuwol's last War God. In other words, he had been a Hero. Of course, there were plenty of people named after historical figures, but Zagar's father hadn't been one of them. At first glance, Zagar seemed to be cut from

the same cloth as Woroy, but there was something fundamentally different about the two of them. Even when he'd been trying to maneuver in the political sphere, Woroy had rarely outright lied to people. This guy, on the other hand, seemed all too happy to spin tall tales.

“Captain, you have to kneel!” Kumluk whispered furiously, but Zagar ignored him.



Even Birakoya, Bahza's ruler and one of the most influential people in Kuwol, had knelt to me. According to the rules of Kuwolese etiquette, Zagar was being extraordinarily rude. I didn't particularly care if people showed me respect or not, but I couldn't allow people to make light of Meraldia, which I was representing. As the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, I far outranked a mere mercenary captain.

Honestly, I wasn't sure what the best way to respond to Zagar's greeting was. Until now, everyone had treated me with respect, so I was able to afford them respect in turn. But if I did that here, it would make me look weak. *Guess I have to be curt.*

"Vice-Commander to Meraldia's Demon Lord, Veight Von Aindorf," I replied brusquely. Fortunately, it seemed Zagar wasn't interested in quibbling about proper manners.

He gave me a confident smile and said, "When we heard Meraldia's famous vice-commander was coming here we got pretty fired up." He pointed to the city. "Pretty impressive, don't you think!?"

What you did is barbaric, not impressive. Destroying the castle gates had probably been necessary, but what point was there in setting fire to entire sections of the city? Though, I guess this is just how mercenaries are. They had no social standing, and their source of income was unstable. To them, capturing cities was how they earned their bonuses. Being able to freely loot and pillage was why these guys had signed up to be mercenaries in the first place. I suspected the reason they hadn't waited for the regular army before beginning their attack was because they hadn't wanted trained troops getting in the way of their fun.

Honestly, I couldn't really blame them. If anything, the coastal alliance was at fault for allowing the mercenaries to serve as their vanguard. Of course, they'd still gone too far, but this wasn't my war. I wasn't at liberty to complain about their methods. Besides, they *had* still succeeded in capturing the city.

"You and your men fought well. I'm sure Lord Bahza will be pleased with your...efforts. Incidentally, did you inflict any casualties among the citizenry?" In the end, I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

Zagar shook his head and replied cheerfully, "Fear not. We destroyed a few buildings to show the city we were serious, but we didn't lay a finger on the civilians. Naturally, I haven't allowed any of my men to loot the city either. I made sure to keep the mercenary troops from the other cities on a tight leash as well."

Really? The city looks pretty damn looted to me. I smelled another lie on Zagar, but I couldn't tell if the entirety of his statement was false, or just part of it.

Before I could voice my suspicions he puffed his chest out proudly

and added, “All we did was requisition supplies and funds from the wealthy. Our contract with Lord Bahza authorizes us to confiscate such spoils of war. If you don’t believe me, I can show you the contract.”

“No thanks.”

Mercenaries were like hunting dogs. You had to keep them fed or they’d turn on you in a heartbeat. Zagar was well aware of that, which was why I had no doubt he really had negotiated such terms with Birakoya. Most mercenary captains were like this guy, and it was actually a bit of a relief to be dealing with such a stereotypical sellsword. People who chased after nothing but profit were easy to manipulate with money. It was those who lived by a code who were hardest to negotiate with. *Come to think of it, Saigo Takamori, that famous samurai, said something similar didn’t he?*

Zagar scrutinized my expression for a few seconds, then smiled again. “I’d like to discuss my future battle plans with the Meraldian army. Would you be willing to come to my headquarters? I’ll treat you all to lunch.”

“Sure, that sounds good to me.”

Anyone treating me to a free lunch was a friend. For as long as they were treating me, anyway.

Zagar had set up his headquarters in one of the ostentatious mansions in the castle district. From the looks of it, it was Lord Karfal’s manor, though everything within that bore his crest had been smashed or burned. I wasn’t too familiar with the inner workings of Kuwol’s politics, but this didn’t strike me as a good sign. If you were to compare Kuwol’s government to the old Japanese shogunate, nobles like Lord Karfal were daimyo.

Lord Karfal’s grandmother was of royal lineage, meaning he was a distant relative of the current king. Though he wasn’t one of the more prominent nobles, his royal bloodline gave him a lot of political leverage—and now, Zagar and his men had beaten this important political figure to a pulp. Not only that, they’d taken over his manor, too. I had a bad feeling about this.

“Zagar, where’s Lord Karfal?”

“He started begging for his life once we captured the city, so I ransomed him off. He’s probably fled to Wajar by now.”

Yeah, this isn’t good. Does he even realize what he’s doing here?

“I heard Lord Karfal is a distant relative of the king. Are you sure you should have treated him with such disrespect? Did Lord Bahza condone this?”

“We’re mercenaries,” Zagar scoffed. “Our only job is to fight whoever we’re contracted out to fight. We beat up our employer’s

enemies, so she's got nothing to complain about."

The mercenaries standing around Zagar nodded vigorously. They clearly worshiped the man. He presented his arguments as though they were logical and correct, but it was clear he didn't care about anyone but himself. *What you're doing is almost certainly a breach of contract.* According to Birakoya, the plan had been to surround Karfal and make it look like the coastal nobles intimidated him into surrendering. That way, he would be able to claim he fought his hardest and save face in front of his king, while also preventing his city from becoming a warzone. Sure, it was a time-consuming method, but one that ensured no one would be hurt, including the mercenaries.

Zagar had probably conspired with the other mercenary companies to topple the city by force. Karfal may have been small, but it still had walls, a castle, and a well-equipped garrison. All of the mercenary companies combined came out to only 3,000 or so troops, so they'd probably suffered significant losses by storming the city. Ultimately, this battle had ended in a victory for the coastal nobles, but Zagar and his men had done nothing but make the situation more complicated while depleting their own resources.

Unable to hold it in any longer, I said bluntly, "I may be stepping out of line here, but don't you think you wasted the lives of your men? These mercenaries were given to you by Lord Bahza, weren't they?"

Zagar let out a booming laugh.

"I'm the one in command here. These boys follow my orders, no one else's! You think Lord Bahza can take command of this war? When she only knows how to fight naval battles? *Hah!*"

"Just because she put these troops under your charge doesn't mean you can do whatever you want with them."

The moment I said that, the mercenaries glared at me.

"Oho," Monza said with a slight smile, glaring back at them.

Normally her smiles were cheerful, but this one was as cold as ice. She licked her lips, ready to pounce on them at a moment's notice. Knowing her, she really would slaughter everyone in this room if I didn't keep her in check. The other werewolves were trying to play it cool, but I could tell they were all raring to kill. Even Grizz and his men were cracking their knuckles. This could turn into a bloodbath at any second.

Zagar didn't look like he was willing to listen to reason. There was no point in negotiating with a guy like him. Unfortunately, if I got into a fight with him and his men here, it would only weaken Lord Bahza's position. We were technically allies, after all. I gave Zagar an insincere smile and clapped his shoulder.

"Either way, you won. It's true that nothing else matters if you can't win, so I'll tell Lord Bahza and the council back home that you

did a good job.”

Zagar immediately picked up on the implication and replied, “That would be quite the honor.”

He seemed quite happy about having his fame spread as far as Meraldia. I could tell from his vulgar grin that he was a base man, through and through.

He patted me on the back and added, “A wise decision, Vice-Commander. I’m glad we can see eye to eye. I suppose military men are the same all over the world, huh? Don’t you agree, men?”

The mercenaries relaxed a little, confident that their ‘hero’ was in control here instead of me. They were like primitive animals. *Sorry, but I’m an educated scholar and mage. I don’t have time for your barbaric games.* I felt no shame at backing down from this.

“In that case, I hope you don’t mind if I bring the rest of my men into the city. They’ll be under my command, not yours, but I’ll do my utmost to assist you.”

“Sure, that’s fine.”

Yet again, I smelled a lie on Zagar. *Looks like I’ll need to be on my guard. He’s determined to get in my way.* I said my farewells with a smile and left his headquarters. In the end, he never did treat me to lunch.

As we returned to the Meraldian force’s campgrounds, Grizz muttered, “That guy’s like a geba. He’s got poison running through his veins.”

Geba were a type of fish popular in Beluza. Their flesh was delicious, but their organs were filled with poison. In that respect, they were similar to pufferfish, but they looked no different from common fish like tuna and salmon so it was hard to tell them apart.

I nodded and replied, “He’s dangerous, that’s for sure. Even worse, he’s smart.”

Nodding, Grizz furrowed his brow. “Soldiers like us aren’t supposed to go overboard. If our boss tells us to kill ten guys, we kill ten guys and that’s it. We don’t kill nine, and we don’t kill eleven. Bossman Garsh taught us that going too far always causes problems down the road.”

“Yep. Because he’s planning his next move on the assumption that you’ve killed exactly ten guys.”

The reason Grizz was in charge of Beluza’s strongest force was precisely because he understood things like that. I sighed loudly and added, “Guys like those mercenaries are nothing but trouble. If I was their employer, I’d have Zagar fired in a heartbeat, but I’m not.”

“That granny is a pretty good politician, but she doesn’t know much about war. Especially land wars.”

“Yeah, it seems like it. None of the coastal nobles have experience when it comes to fighting on land.”

Even if Zagar stepped out of line, Birakoya couldn't afford to fire him.

“How do you think the war's going to go from here, boss?”

“I doubt Lord Karfal's going to just let this go. There's nothing more dangerous than a noble whose pride has been wounded. They care about stupid crap like that even more than mercenaries do.”

For a noble, it was important that their peasants, retainers, peers, and lords respected them. Respect was a currency worth its weight in gold. The more respected a ruler was, the more stable their rule.

“I don't know what kind of person Lord Karfal is, but we should definitely be wary. If he's anything like other nobles, he'll come for revenge the first chance he gets.”

I doubted he was kind enough to forgive someone who trashed his city with an army of commoners.

Once we were crossed into Karfal, I started looking for a place to house my men.

“We're going to need lodging. Fortunately, this city is under the coastal nobles' control, so we can just requisition some civilian houses.”

“Veight...are you sure that's a good idea?” Fahn asked with a worried look. She'd gotten quite good at understanding how humans thought recently, and she'd realized that doing that would earn us the resentment of the people we displaced.

I smiled and replied, “Look at how battered the houses are around here. If we're going to use them, we'll need to fix them up first, right?”

Just as I said that, Jerrick came over with a wagon full of lumber and bricks.

“Hey, boss! This should be enough right!? I'm gonna need to start working soon or the sun'll set before I'm done!”

“Yeah, that should be good. Try to rebuild everything in the Kuwol style if you can. Get some of the citizens to help, too.”

“Gotcha!”

Everyone in Jerrick's squad was a smith, carpenter, or stonemason. They got to work immediately, measuring pillar lengths and testing the foundations of the damaged buildings. Fahn watched blankly for a few seconds, but then she realized what I was doing.

“Oh, I get it. In that case, there's no problem with using other people's houses. Alright, guys, get ready! We're gonna fix this place up! You should be used to it after living in the village for so long!”

Yeah, all of our houses back home were so ramshackle we needed to fix them every year. Grizz's men looked eager to help out as well.

“Come on, you louts, you better help out too! It’s no different from fixing a ship so don’t tell me you can’t do it!”

“Aye, aye, sir!”

Everyone quickly got to work. I was curious what the locals thought of our actions, but since we were basically conscripting them into helping, it didn’t really matter if they liked us or not. In truth, I would have preferred a more subtle approach, but this was the best way to appease all sides.

“Make sure you build things back to the way they were! We’ll be leaving this place soon enough, so it’s more important that the original inhabitants can use these buildings as they did before.”

This way we could say we just repaired these buildings because we needed a place to stay. It would give us a convenient excuse if Zagar complained. I was paying for the building materials with the money I’d gotten from selling the dragonscale gems I bought off of Mao, so no one could complain about that either. Incidentally, I’d sold those gems only to merchants Grizz and the others trusted to make sure I didn’t get ripped off. Because it was a gem that couldn’t be found in Kuwol, even the tiny ones had sold for insane prices. I did feel a little guilty about what I’d done, but those merchants would be reselling them to rich nobles for an even greater profit.

Regardless, the point was that I had a ton of money thanks to this. I could afford to dump a decent chunk of that into the city to help it rebuild.

Soon after the rebuilding projects started, Kumluk showed up. *Did Zagar send him to keep an eye on me?*

“What are you doing, Lord Veight?”

“Preparing lodging for my men. I figured we should at least do this much. Our work should be finished soon.”

I was doing this with my men and my money, so Zagar couldn’t stop me. But if he wanted to try, he was more than welcome to. I grinned, and Kumluk gave me a stern look.

“Lord Veight, don’t tell me you’re sympathizing with the people...”

“Whatever could you be referring to?”

As an outsider, I couldn’t butt into this country’s affairs, which was why I was “just” preparing lodging for my men.

Kumluk sighed and said, “My family runs a ceramics business. When I still worked for my father, procuring ceramic tiles was my job. Thanks to that, I know a fair bit about construction.” He looked up at me with a small smile. “Would it be alright if I helped out?”

“Of course! Thank you.”

Kumluk took off his surcoat and said in a pidgin mixture of

Kuwolese and Meraldian, “Hey, you! You’re stacking those bricks all wrong! A stiff breeze will knock over anything built like that! Who’s the owner of this house!? You? If you don’t want it rebuilt like crap, go help out!”

The werewolves were confused by Kumluk’s sudden appearance, but he ignored them and kept dragging more of the locals in to help.

“You over there! Don’t throw that ceramic plate away! The serpent pattern on it is the avatar of Mejire. Every house has something with his likeness to ward off evil spirits. The house’s owner’s name is also written on it. Stick the broken bits back together and hang it up on the south wall.”

Ahh, so it’s like a door plate, but more religious. It’s pretty thin, though. The Beluzan soldier holding the two pieces of the ceramic plate looked down at it in confusion.

“I dunno how you’re supposed to glue pottery like this...”

“Really? Let me do it then. You get back to rebuilding. If you guys find any other broken pieces of pottery, bring them to me.”

Kumluk took the plate pieces from the soldier, then took a small vase and a leather pouch out of his bag. From the looks of it, he was lacquering the pottery back together. His hands moved deftly; this was work he was clearly used to. That being said, now that we had to fix everyone’s pottery too, I wasn’t sure we could finish on time.

* * * *

—Mismatched Pieces—

I lined up the broken pieces of pottery, looked at them for a few seconds, then rearranged them around. It was easy to tell what design these kinds of plates had originally. All I needed was to look at one piece to figure out which one it belonged to. As I lacquered the plates back together, I snuck a sidelong glance at the famous Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander. I hadn’t expected him to be so gentle. He seemed more like a merchant than a warrior. Lady Birakoya probably took such a liking to him because he’s a good businessman. As a fellow merchant, I found it easy to get along with Lord Veight as well.

But despite his gentle demeanor, I could still tell he was a skilled warrior. He didn’t cave to threats, and his self-confidence was unshakable. In that respect, he was just as reliable as our captain, Zagar.

“Hmm...”

I stopped my repair work momentarily and lapsed into thought. *Just what kind of life do you have to lead to become so skilled at both war and business?* It felt as though Lord Veight had lived two whole lifetimes. Even though he was younger than me, he seemed so much

older.

Hold on. There is one class of people who learn how to be both warriors and merchants. Nobles. Nobles often had to deal with merchants, and if someone threatened their domain, they picked up their swords and fought.

“Ah, that explains everything.”

Lord Veight was undoubtedly a noble from an old and prestigious family. I had dealt with plenty of nobles back when I was working for my family, and only those from truly old and powerful families had been like Lord Veight. They were kind to commoners and didn't bother to put on airs—they had no need to.

However, that brought to mind another question: Lord Veight was a werewolf, a type of demon that only lived on the northern continent. It made no sense for a demon to be a noble. Demons were all strong fighters, but I had never heard of any of them creating complex societies the way humans did.

“Hmmmmmm...”

I folded my arms, trying to think of an alternative answer. The two sides of Veight just didn't seem to match up. How were those two pieces linked?

“Is something bothering you, Sir Kumluk?”

Lord Veight's question snapped me out of my brooding and I looked up to see him smiling at me. He then looked down at the plate in my hands and nodded.

“I can't believe you're able to repair such badly damaged pottery.”

“Err, well, these are symbols that represent the head of each household. They may belong to strangers who have nothing to do with Bahza, but I can't bear to see them shattered.”

I quickly stuck the pieces in my hands back together and smiled awkwardly up at Lord Veight. It was a little terrifying how easily I had started to let my guard down around him. We had only met a few days ago, but I already found myself wanting to spend more time with him. *You've gotta keep it together. Captain Zagar sent you here to keep an eye on Lord Veight, remember.* Unaware of my inner turmoil, Lord Veight swept his gaze over all the other plates I had fixed.

“In the far eastern nation of Wa, they have this technique of pottery repair known as ‘kintsugi.’ They use lacquer mixed with gold to fill in cracks, giving repaired objects an aged feel. Sometimes they even shatter pottery on purpose so they can repair it.”

Seriously? That's insane. But at the same time, it sounded fascinating. If Wa's craftsmen really did break their pottery on purpose, their repair techniques must be beautiful.

“I'd like to see one of their art pieces myself someday.”

“It sounds interesting, right?” Lord Veight gave me a boyish smile

and added, “We need to put an end to this war as fast as possible. The sooner Kuwol is at peace, the faster you guys can start importing Wa’s pottery.”

His smile was so innocent that I looked down in shame. For a mercenary like me, peace meant low profits. *But at the same time, peace doesn’t sound so bad...*

* * * *

I was pretty confident that Kumluk had been sent here by Zagar to keep an eye on us. Despite that, he was focused solely on his repair work and had stopped monitoring me. He had the kind of meticulous personality that was so very important for vice-commanders. *Nothing I say is gonna get through to him when he’s this engrossed in his work.* Shrugging, I headed off to the marketplace to buy chicken. I took care of a few other small errands, then looked off into the distance.

Fish was a lot cheaper in Kuwol than chicken, but freshwater fish had a scent Meraldians wouldn’t be able to stomach. This especially applied to werewolves, since their sense of smell was so keen. Freshwater fish tended to have white meat and light flavors, so they were easy to season. Any chef worth their salt would be able to make a good dish with them.

I started a small fire using scrap wood, diced all the vegetables I’d bought, and went to a nearby well to get water. After paying the well owner, I went back and started preparing dinner. Since I needed to cook enough for 250 people, a single pot wouldn’t cut it. I took out a few of the oversized pots werewolves used to cook and lined them up above the fire. This was too much food to cook alone, so I nabbed a few of the Beluzan soldiers who knew how to cook as well.

Once the pots started boiling, I took out the dried shellfish I’d bought at Bahza. Shellfish was a delicacy in Kuwol and by no means cheap, but I wasn’t stingy with how much I threw into the pots. Shellfish made for good soup stock, and their flavor would mix well with the chicken I was about to add. Once the shellfish had been thoroughly boiled, I dumped the chicken and vegetables into the pots. After a while, some soup scum started rising to the surface, and I ladled it out as best I could. I wasn’t the most thorough, but there were too many pots for me to meticulously look after each one. Finally, I dumped some salt into the pots and sampled the soup. The soldiers I’d called over to help tasted the soup as well, then nodded in satisfaction to each other.

“What do you guys think?”

“Tastes pretty good, boss.”

“It’d be nice to have some fish bones to fill out the flavor, but I guess we can’t ask for too much.”

It would have been nice to add a bit more complex seasoning to the soup, but I needed to make 250 portions so I didn't have the time. Instead, I poured a dollop of soy sauce in each pot to make up for it. *Thank god I brought this stuff with me.* Soon enough, the row of pots started emitting a delicious smell. Grizz wiped his forehead with a cloth wrapped around his neck and walked over, lured in by the aroma.

"I was wondering where that smell was coming from. You're a pretty good cook, Veight."

"I spent a lot of time cooking at home before I became a soldier. How's the taste?"

He brought a small spoonful of soup to his mouth and smiled wryly at me. "Even if it was bad, it's not like I can complain about the vice-commander's cooking."

Grizz was also the head chef at the Beluzan restaurant in Ryunheit. *Look man, there's only so much I can do when cooking on the battlefield with limited ingredients.* That being said, if this soup was horrible it might be better to let someone else be in charge of cooking.

"Should I just be peeling potatoes and let someone else cook our meals?"

"Nah. For a meal on the march, this is pretty good. Now if you wanted to work at our restaurant, you'd need another three years of training."

"Fair enough."

People went to restaurants to eat food better than what they could make at home, so it was hardly surprising Grizz was a few levels above me. Though, if I had a microwave and a rice cooker, I could do a lot more.

By the time the sun set, most houses were at least fixed up enough to protect their residents from the elements. Of course, the ones that had been completely destroyed would take more than half a day to fix, so we'd need to keep working on them tomorrow. Just as I was about to start distributing my soup to the exhausted soldiers, a voice shouted, "First up is the Charuza from the Sea Snake Squad! He's gonna show us his knife juggling skills!"

From the looks of it, the men had started up a mini-party around the fire. One of the Beluzan soldiers was showing off his knife juggling ability. He managed to stoop down and take sips from his bottle of rum while he juggled, which was quite a feat. That was all well and good, but I hadn't given the men permission to drink.

"Hey, Grizz, where'd you get this booze from?"

"The residents gave it to us as thanks for helping them rebuild their homes."

"Oh jeez."

How many times do I have to tell you not to accept gifts before it sinks in? Now that they'd already accepted, it was too late to tell them to give the alcohol back. Returning a gift once accepted was the height of rudeness in Kuwolese culture. Reluctantly, I allowed the soldiers to drink. They had worked their butts off for a good half a day under the blazing sun, so they deserved this much.

"Next up, we've got Gorbeth from the same Sea Snake Squad! He's gonna show off his axe throwing skills. Line up the empty bottles, you layabouts!"

Are all you guys only good at throwing sharp objects around? Also, why is everyone from the Sea Snake Squad?

"Hey, werewolves! Why don't you show us what kinda tricks you can do!" one of the soldiers shouted.

"Ahaha, how about I hit you all in the forehead with my knives?" Monza replied with a playful laugh.

"Please don't kill our allies, Monza."

Maybe I should volunteer instead. I know a few tri—actually, wait, that's just gonna bring back traumatic memories from my past life. Nevermind. As I sighed to myself, I smelled someone nearby. They were young and rather scared. I turned in the direction of the scent and spotted a Kuwolese boy hiding in the shadow of a nearby building. He looked to be around 10 years old and was staring intently at the soup pots.

Chicken was relatively cheap meat, but meat was still a luxury, doubly so in a city that had just been captured by mercenaries who likely stole a bunch of food. I knew if I fed this kid, I'd soon have a flood of hungry mouths lining up, but at the same time, I couldn't just abandon him. Besides, we still had quite a bit of money left.

"Hey, mind if I ask you a favor?" I asked softly in Kuwolese, doing my best not to scare the kid.

"I ended up making too much food. It'd be a shame to let it go to waste, so do you think you could call your friends over?"

The young boy stared at me for a few seconds, then nodded silently. I piled some chicken and vegetables onto a plate and offered it to him.

"Here's your reward. You've gotta know the food's good before you call everyone else over, right? Go ahead, eat."

The boy slowly staggered out of the shadows. He looked like he was starving.

"I bought the chicken and vegetables here, so you don't need to worry. There's nothing weird in this." I gave him a reassuring smile. "Go on."

The boy nodded, and started shoveling food into his mouth. It always made me feel warm and fuzzy inside watching children eat

their fill. The boy cleaned the plate in seconds, then started glancing back towards the pot. Growing boys sure needed a lot of food.

“You can have seconds once you’ve called everyone else over. If you don’t hurry, the soldiers will finish it all.”

The boy didn’t seem to realize I was contradicting what I’d said earlier about having made too much, and he hurriedly ran off. A short distance away I heard him shout, “Mom! Moooooom! A soldier with a funny accent said we can eat their food!”

“Really!? He didn’t do anything awful to you, did he!?”

“No, he was really nice! He said I should call everyone over!”

“Good grief. How did you end up such a reckless tomboy? Did you forget what those mercenaries did the other day?”

“Look, just come quick! He said if we don’t hurry the food will be gone!”

Wait, that was a girl, not a boy? Her appearance and scent was exactly like a boy’s, though. Well, whatever. It’s not important. I turned to Mary, who was adding water to the pots and said, “Would you mind going shopping for more food, Mary? Here’s my wallet.”

“I knew this would happen. I’m gonna take two squads with me, okay?”

How much are you planning on buying?

“If there’s too much, we can save the extra for tomorrow’s breakfast. If it’s smoked, it lasts longer, too.”

I get that you only want to buy meat, but you need to get some vegetables too, you know. Slowly but surely, the local residents began to gather around us. I urged them all to eat their fill, but they seemed reticent. There were a lot of unspoken cultural rules in Kuwol about giving and receiving gifts, which was why I stressed multiple times that this wasn’t a gift.

“I really did just make too much, so you guys will be doing me a favor by eating it. Don’t worry, as long as the Meraldian army is here, I won’t allow anyone to hurt you guys.”

Nibert, who was wolfing down stew at a breakneck pace, cocked his head.

“I guess even Veight makes mistakes sometimes, huh, bro?”

Garbert smacked him upside the head and said, “Moron! He’s just saying that so those humans don’t feel bad about eating our food! Use your head for once!”

You should use your head, too. If you say it out loud, it defeats the purpose. Garbert even had to go and shout that in his crappy Kuwolese instead of Meraldian. Embarrassed, I put some distance between me and the starving residents. *I hope you’re ready for a long lecture tomorrow, Garbert.* Though, I was happy that even he was starting to understand how human society worked.

Turning around, I saw that my werewolves, Grizz's soldiers, and Kuwol's citizens were all chatting together, sharing their food and booze with each other. *What a nice sight.* I walked over to Kumluk, who was currently drinking with some Beluzan soldiers, to tell him I was leaving. When I said that, Kumluk looked up at me with a half-drunk, half-panicked expression and said, "Captain Zagar prepared bedrooms in the manshon for all the army'sh commandersh. You should go shleep there."

"Thanks, Sir Kumluk. Hey, someone get this guy some water."

Kumluk looked like he was pretty weak to alcohol, so it was best that he didn't drink any more. *Now then, are these generous accommodations a trap, or an attempt to win me over?*

Zagar was up to something for sure, but I nevertheless made my way over to Lord Karfal's mansion. When they spotted me, the mercenaries guarding the entrance immediately opened the door. There was a small villa behind the main mansion where Lord Karfal's family had presumably lived. These were fitting accommodations for a foreign diplomat, but I felt bad for staying here when the original inhabitants had been driven out. What I found waiting for me inside didn't make me feel any better, either.

The moment I entered my room, the heavy scents of human and perfume assailed my nostrils. There were multiple people in here, and they were clearly scared. I swept my gaze across the room and found three beautiful women wearing nothing but translucent negligees.

"I believe this is supposed to be my bedroom. Who are you three?" I asked in Kuwolese.

"We were sent here to attend to you through the night, Lord Veight," one of them responded timidly.

This was undoubtedly Zagar's doing. I didn't know what he was planning, but he was causing me nothing but trouble. I was annoyed, but not at these three girls.

"I'm sorry, but I don't need any such service. Would you mind leaving?"

The women's fear grew a few shades stronger.

"P-Please don't kick us out! Lord Zagar will kill us if you do!"

That bastard. Sighing, I put my coat back on. "In that case, I'll be the one to leave. You three can rest here."

The one girl who hadn't spoken yet gave me a confused look.

"Why? You really don't need to be so wary of us..."

I smiled cordially to try and reassure the women and replied, "I'm not wary of you. It's just that my wife won't be happy if she finds out I spent the night here. She's very cute, but she's also Meraldia's Demon Lord."

Might as well brag a little about my wife. She was both someone I respected greatly and found extremely adorable, so I couldn't help myself. However, the women just stared blankly at me for a few seconds.

"Umm...err..."

Sorry, now probably isn't the time for that, huh? I smiled again and tried to smooth things over.

"Anyway, I'll tell the mercenaries you all aren't at fault, so don't worry. I'll be taking my leave now."

I'll just go back and sleep with the others. I never imagined going up in status would make it *harder* to find places to sleep.

After returning to the banquet, I started looking for Sir Kumluk. When I finally found him, he was dead drunk, so I gave up on holding a coherent conversation with him. I did ask to make sure no one harmed the three women in "my" room, though. I would feel bad if they got hurt because of me. *I'll ask Sir Kumluk again in the morning just in case he doesn't remember.*

The next morning, I woke up with a splitting headache. It appeared I had too much rum to drink last night as well. *Maybe that's why I dreamed about Friedensrichter last night.*

I dreamt about him pretty frequently, but in this dream, I'd been back in Japan, and Friedensrichter had been a regular old bartender. He'd been quite handsome, and he looked right at home serving alcohol. However, regardless of what I asked for, the only drink he would give me was straight rum, and the only snacks he offered were grasshoppers. Baltze and Kurtz had been in the dream as well, and they'd both been wearing suits. They had been discussing whether or not to turn the demon army into a public corporation and make an IPO, but by the end, they started talking about how attractive thighs were. Around the time the conversation was getting really imbecilic, I tried to excuse myself and go to the bathroom, but then I woke up. This was the first time I had ever seen such a strange dream.

The sun was awfully yellow, and it seemed to look hazy. I had never seen Meraldia's sun look like this. *Wait, it's not the sun that's hazy, it's my brain.* The alcohol was still in my system. I rubbed my flank and muttered a short spell to enhance my liver function, so I could detox faster.

Soon enough, my hangover faded and the sun stopped looking hazy. *I wish I had magic like this in my past life.* I walked out of my tent and saw most of the werewolves and Beluzan soldiers were still sprawled all over the ground. They'd gone to all the effort of fixing up the people's houses, but they were sleeping outside anyway.

"Go wash your faces, everyone. Oh, but don't use the river. You'll

get mud in your eyes and nose. Also, we're not used to the water here, so it's possible it might make us sick. I've already paid the well owner, so go pull some buckets of water up from there."

Well water came from underground aquifers, so it was generally purer than river water. The Beluzan soldiers all lined up in front of the well and started washing themselves. With how many bacteria were in the Mejire River, it was basically no different than poison to Meraldians. Werewolves weren't any more resistant to disease than humans, so we had to watch out as well.

I found Sir Kumluk, woke him up with a hefty dose of detoxification magic, and explained to him again what happened last night.

"I'm married, so I don't need you sending prostitutes to my room, okay?"

"U-Understood?"

He nodded, but he still looked confused. I wasn't well-versed in this aspect of Kuwolese culture, so I couldn't tell what he was bothered about. Regardless, he hurried back to the mercenaries' main camp, so I started fixing myself breakfast from yesterday's leftovers. Today, too, the plan was to have my werewolves and Beluzan soldiers repair the city's buildings, though I did send two of Hamaam's squad back to Bahza with a letter for Birakoya.

"Make sure you give this to Lady Birakoya in person. I don't want anyone else reading this letter."

"Got it, Vice-Commander."

All of the people from Hamaam's squad came from outside our village. Most of them had joined bandit groups to disguise themselves until they rejoined the demon army. As a result, they were good riders, and skilled at covert ops. The letter contained my report on the current situation in Karfal. I'd written down my misgivings about the mercenary army as well. Once she read this, I suspected Birakoya would make a move.

The only problem was, even going at top speed and switching horses at rest stops, it took about three to four days to make a round trip from Bahza to Karfal. Naturally, an army would take far longer to cross that distance. In other words, Zagar was still the highest authority here for at least the next little while. Sighing, I turned to Fahn.

"I guess the mercenaries acted obediently early on because they didn't want to upset Lady Birakoya while she was close enough to stop them."

"But now they can show their true colors?" Fahn pulled back her lips and bared her fangs to illustrate her point. She didn't look too interested in the conversation, though. Werewolves didn't really care

about politics, and she was no exception.

“Most likely. The regular army is a hodgepodge of conscripts and new recruits, so they’re not as strong as their numbers would suggest. If the mercenaries betrayed the coastal nobles now, they would be doomed.”

There were only navy soldiers, town guards, and militia volunteers in the coastal alliance’s army. I doubted they would be able to pull off the complex maneuvers a land army needed to succeed. I had experienced enough battles in this world to know how fragile an army out of formation was. These mercenaries weren’t especially experienced in land warfare either, but Zagar was a specialist at it. He was probably at least drilling his men on the basics, too.

“These mercenaries are just waiting for the moment when they can go on a rampage and do whatever they want. The attack on this city was their way of testing the waters.”

If Birakoya censured them for acting on their own, they would either fall in line or switch sides and join the king. Either way, it would take at least three days for her to send a response. If Zagar’s mercenaries breached the capital before that, there would be no one to stop them.

Vodd, who was chopping up lumber into smaller pieces, suddenly muttered, “Even if the coastal alliance’s army is just for show, they’ve got the numbers. There were only three thousand of these mercs to begin with, and they lost quite a few men storming the city, didn’t they?”

“Apparently, Zagar used mercenary companies from the other cities as meat shields, so he actually hasn’t lost that many. His core company of one thousand is completely unscathed, and a bunch of guys from the other mercenary companies have sworn allegiance to him too.”

I’d heard that from Sir Kumluk last night.

“Besides...” I trailed off as a heavily armored middle-aged man walked up to me.

“Excuse me. I am Barkel’s son, Shumza. Are you the captain of this mercenary troupe?”

He spoke politely, but his armor was caked with dirt and grime. I could see rust forming on the links of his chainmail, and his bracers and pauldrons were mismatched. He’d clearly taken them from different suits of armor. Worse, he only had a single greave, and even though it was meant for the right leg, he was wearing it on his left. It was probably because that was his leading leg, and he wanted to protect it. The scimitar at his waist looked quite old as well. His leather sword belt smelled like he had treated it with cheap oil, too. He looked like one of those wandering warrior types.

I cocked my head and replied, “No, I’m the leader of the Meraldian force. If you want the mercenary captain, he’s in Lord Karfal’s mansion.”

“Thank you, good sir. In that case, if you will excuse me, I have business with him.”

The man knelt on his right knee, then strode off, but the odious smell from his sword belt lingered. As we watched him go, Vodd sighed and said, “That’s a broke mercenary if I ever saw one. He’s probably the third or fourth son of some low-ranking noble who ran off in search of adventure. Guys like those always end up broke in a decade or two. I’ve seen it happen a bunch in Meraldia.”

“Are there really that many people dying to join Zagar’s company?”

“Oh yeah.” Vodd nodded, narrowing his eyes slightly. “Whenever a trustworthy mercenary captain starts making money, word spreads fast. Mercs start lining up in droves to join that captain’s company, since if they let even one chance slip past, they’ll starve.”

“I guess to people not in the know, it does look like the coastal alliance is taking down cities with god-like speed.”

Even though in truth, the river nobles had already made secret treaties with the coastal nobles. Of course, to the average person, it looked like the coastal alliance’s army was so strong that cities surrendered the moment they drew close. It was hardly surprising that freelance mercenaries would mistakenly believe that the army’s resounding success was due to Zagar’s efforts since he was leading the vanguard. Still, this was a worrying development.

“Monza.”

“What’s up?” Monza poked her head down from the roof she was repairing.

How on earth is she supporting her body weight in that position? I was pretty curious, but work took priority.

“Take your squad and keep an eye on Zagar,” I said. “Make sure no one spots you guys.”

“Sure, you got it.”

She pulled her head back and hopped down. I had known her practically all my life, but somehow she was still full of surprises. Now that I knew these mercenaries would eventually end up our enemies, it was time to start gathering intel.

I learned quite a few ill tidings through my investigation. First of all, the coastal alliance’s army had been posting soldiers at each city they passed, so they were significantly smaller now than when they’d started out. The river nobles might have surrendered, but the coastal nobles weren’t taking any chances. They wanted to make sure their path of retreat was secure, hence they were keeping a few soldiers in

each of the conquered cities to serve as relay points, and to keep an eye on things. The number of troops still on their way to Karfal numbered only 6,000. The remaining 2,000 were stationed in the cities dotting the river.

On the other hand, the mercenaries had lost about 20% of their men in the assault and were down to about 2,600. However, according to Monza, there were tons of prospective new recruits lining up to join Zagar's company. If the mercenaries did indeed switch sides and attacked the coastal alliance army with the king's 4,000-strong royal guard, the alliance would be finished.

As I stuffed myself full of the lunch Grizz had cooked, I told him, "This means Zagar alone gets to decide which side wins this civil war."

"I don't like the sound of that one bit. By the way, do you want seconds?"

"Absolutely."

"Coming right up."

Grizz had made this dish with Kuwol's staple grain, meji. It was known in other countries as Kuwol barley, and Grizz had made a sort of paella out of it. Honestly speaking, meji itself wasn't very tasty. Meraldians who were used to wheat and rice probably wouldn't like it. However, you didn't have to grind meji down into flour to cook it. That being said, if you just cooked it like you would rice it didn't come out very good. It had taken Grizz a lot of experimentation to find a dish he could make with it that suited the palates of Meraldians. One of the few advantages of excursions like this was being able to try out new food, so I was glad Grizz was here to cook it in delicious ways for me.

"This is really good. If I'd known you could cook meji like this, I would have looked into importing it. The way you grilled this fish is amazing too."

"Heh. I used Meraldian herbs to offset the pungent smell of river fish. The fish they get here taste a lot like cod, so if you prepare them right, they're damn good."

Grizz smiled, the expression at odds with his rather terrifying face. It was a shame he looked like a back alley drug dealer, since he really was an all-around good guy.

As everyone ate, I explained our future plans, "This mercenary company's dangerous. There's no telling when they might betray their employer."

"Does that mean you're gonna try and keep that Zagar guy happy, boss?"

"Yeah, for now. It'll be a problem if I'm the reason this alliance falls apart."

I'd play the sycophant for now, but as soon as this squabble with the king was over, I was planning on having Birakoya disband this company.

"Lord Bahza said she had already sent messengers to the king, so they're probably in the middle of talks. We just have to buy time until they reach an agreement."

"Aye, aye, Veight."

"You got it, boss."

Everyone nodded, though I could tell their focus was mostly on the paella.

* * * *

—The Stirrings of Ambition: Part 1—

"What? He doesn't want the women!?" Zagar raised an eyebrow at his vice-commander's report. "Does that Meraldian fool not understand Kuwolese manners? Surely he must know what it means to return a gift freely given."

"He probably does, but I imagine he wants to stick to his principles. Besides, he never accepted the gift in the first place."

Kumluk was standing at attention, beads of sweat dripping down his forehead. Zagar on the other hand was still confused.

"I guess... But why? Who would complain about women that fine? They were working in Karfal's castle. All of them are well-educated and are prime breeding material—and I haven't had my way with them yet, either."

"I think the problem lies elsewhere, Captain. Lord Veight said he refused because he is already married."

"Huh? The hell?" Zagar's eyebrow shot up again. "If he's married, isn't this his chance to cut loose and sow some seeds with other girls? He won't get many other chances to bed Kuwolese beauties."

"I'm afraid I'm still a bachelor so I cannot hope to understand his feelings."

"Well, I don't have a wife either, so I don't get it myself. But don't high-ranking men normally have a bunch of concubines? Karfal sure did."

When Zagar had ransomed Karfal off, he'd received the noble's two mistresses in exchange. It was a pretty normal thing to do in Kuwol. No matter how hard he thought about it, Zagar couldn't figure out Veight's reasoning, so he put the whole thing out of his mind.

"Well, whatever. If he doesn't want them, that's fine. But if I can't get him to accept one of my gifts, it'll hurt my reputation."

Kumluk sighed. "Is that really so important?"

"If you wanna lead mercenaries, you *need* a good reputation. If

even a single person thinks you're a pushover, you're done for. A guy from a good family like you might not realize it, but mercenaries are just hired thugs. If you wanna keep them in line, you need people to fear and respect you."

Zagar's tone was surprisingly gentle. He sounded like he was giving Kumluk genuine advice. He folded his arms and lapsed into thought for a few seconds.

"Anyway, find a way to get those women to help the Meraldian army out. They can work as interpreters, cooks, or accountants for all I care, just find a way to get Veight to take my gift. These girls were Karfal's maids, surely there's something they can do for him."

"That's a good idea. I'll ask Lord Veight what he thinks of taking them in as part of the army," Kumluk replied, looking visibly relieved. Noticing his expression, Zagar clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"...But I don't like that man. He acts too much like a saint."

"Really? He seems easy to get along with to me."

"That's just part of his act. No one gets as high up on the totem pole as vice-commander to a country's ruler without at least a little bit of backhanded scheming." Zagar shook his head and added, "But I wouldn't want him as an enemy. You've heard the rumors surrounding him too, haven't you?"

"Yes. I heard he annihilated an army of four hundred with just a few of his men, and then destroyed a city's gates all by himself. Apparently, he also has the power to summon huge skeleton armies."

"Yeah, the more I look into this guy, the crazier he sounds. He even stormed the empire far to the north and put one of his friends on the throne."

"That...certainly is impressive."

"He forged alliances with all of Meraldia's neighboring countries, and I heard Wa's best spies work for him now. He's got more going for him than just brawn, that's for sure." Zagar's lips curled up into a smile as he said that. "Though, I bet most of those rumors are ones he spread himself. I've done the same, so I know. I'm not the descendant of a War God; I've never cut a horseman and his horse in half in one stroke; and I haven't caught an arrow bare-handed either."

"I expected as much..." Kumluk replied with a wry smile. Zagar's smile suddenly vanished.

"But you know, if even one of the rumors surrounding Veight is true, or even half-true, that still makes him one hell of a monster."

According to the stories, Veight was a werewolf, a legendary demon that boasted far greater strength than any human. No one Zagar had talked to had actually seen Veight transform, but if what people said was true, that made Veight quite a threat.

"I heard werewolves can fly through the sky and suck people's

blood, too.”

“Wasn’t it vampires who can do that?”

“Hmm, now that you mention it...”

Kuwol had neither vampires nor werewolves living in its borders, so neither Zagar nor Kumluk had seen one in the flesh.

“Anyway, as long as Veight doesn’t try to pull anything, don’t mess with him. Keep an eye on their entourage, but that’s all. I don’t want him getting in my way, and I *definitely* don’t want to make him my enemy.”

“Understood.”

Kumluk nodded, and Zagar grinned.

“Don’t worry. It doesn’t matter what kind of insane monster he is, he can’t win against desire. As long as we give him something he wants, he’ll join our side.”

Kumluk frowned at that. “Are you sure, sir? Quite frankly, I have no idea what he’s thinking.”

Zagar casually waved his hand in dismissal and replied, “Money makes the world go round. Even if there’s someone who isn’t interested in money, they probably still want fame, or titles, or hot women, or good booze.”

“I’m no saint, so I’d be happy with any of those myself.”

“Same. I want it all.” Zagar chuckled, then ordered, “Keep a close on eye on that Meraldian general. He doesn’t seem to like us much right now, but we’ll be allies as soon as we can find out what he wants.”

“Yes, sir!”

As soon as his straight-laced vice-commander left, Zagar called a different mercenary in.

“Hajji. Were you able to capture Birakoya’s messengers?”

“Yeah, it was a piece of cake. The moment we told them we were from your squad, they let their guard down. Also...” The grinning mercenary slid a finger across his throat. “We stole all their stuff, crushed their faces beyond recognition, and dumped their bodies into the Mejire. I guess they’re happy the river’s carrying them home at least.”

“Nice work, Hajji. Looks like Mondstrahl’s blessing shines upon assassins like you, too.”

The man called Hajji cocked his head.

“But are you sure about this? If Kumluk finds out, he’ll throw a fit.”

“Then make sure he doesn’t find out. He’s my right-hand man, but that means he doesn’t need to know what my left-hand man’s doing.”

“Heh, I guess not.”

“I want you to keep watch over Veight, too. Also, keep an eye on

Kumluk for me. He's loyal, but he lets his emotions get the better of him too easily. If it looks like he's gonna betray me..."

"Kill him?" Hajji asked, gripping the hilt of the short sword at his waist. That small blade of his had slain more people than Zagar could count. Whether it was on the battlefield or off it, there was no one who'd fought Hajji and lived to tell the tale—with the sole exception of Zagar.

The mercenary captain casually replied, "No, report it to me. I'll decide what to do with him. Don't act on your own."

Zagar watched Hajji carefully as he said that.

"I have no need for disloyal dogs. That includes you, Hajji."

"I know, Captain."

The former assassin bowed his head and silently left the room.

Once he was alone, Zagar looked over the letter that had been delivered to him earlier. He had sent a message to king Pajam the Second, but the reply he just received had been written by the grand chamberlain. The letter's contents were a short "Our great king has nothing to say to the leader of a bunch of mercenary thugs."

Zagar had said in his message that if the king was willing to make him a noble, he wouldn't mind switching sides and crushing the coastal alliance. But he'd been completely ignored. *What a fool. Don't you get how good a deal this is for you? You're gonna pay for ignoring me.* Zagar held the letter over a candle and watched it slowly burn to ashes.

This plan had failed, but he had others in mind. Zagar knew there was no such thing as a perfect plan, so he always prepared backups, and backups for his backups. But there was one little thing still nagging at him.

He walked over to the window and looked down at the city. *That foreign general's up to something. I know it.*

"Damn monster. I'm not scared of you," Zagar muttered softly, taking great care not to be overheard.

* * * *

I was worried the mercenaries would take matters into their own hands and attack the capital right away, but to my relief, they didn't. According to Monza's reports, he was assassinating all of Birakoya's messengers and sending his own letters to someone. However, even Monza wasn't able to figure out the contents of his letters—though I was willing to bet money that whoever he was talking to, it wasn't a friend of the coastal nobles. It was growing clearer by the day that Zagar was a threat.

When Vodd heard Monza's report, he grinned and said, "Employers like to lord their power over mercs by saying they can fire

them at any time, but mercs always have the trump card known as betrayal. ‘Course, it’s not just mercenaries who can play that card.”

“Birakoya’s paying them fairly. I can’t believe they still want more.”

“That’s just how mercs are, though if they play the betrayal card too much, no one’ll trust ’em enough to hire ’em. Me and my mates never betrayed our employers.”

Trust is a form of currency too, after all.

“Does that mean there’s something Zagar wants so badly he’s willing to throw away all the trust he’s built up until now to get it?”

“It’s possible. I’ve got no clue though,” Vodd said with a shrug.

“We’ve returned, Vice-Commander,” one of Hamaam’s squadmates said, running up to me. I’d written the letter I’d sent to Birakoya before I asked Monza to keep tabs on Zagar, so she probably didn’t know the mercenary captain was killing her messengers yet. Despite that, she was perceptive enough to pick up on the same things as me.

“Our alliance will be in a perilous position if those mercenaries betray us. For now, please allow them to do as they please. We have evidence of their wrongdoings, and the coastal nobles are united in their opinion, so we can deal with them once this war is over.”

It appeared Birakoya was planning to use the mercenaries for as long as possible, then throw them away once they’d outlived their usefulness. I had no sympathy for the mercenaries, though; they were at fault for going against orders. I jotted down everything I’d learned these past few days and entrusted the letter to Hamaam’s squad again.

“Sorry for asking you to leave just as you got back, but can you get this to Lady Birakoya as fast as possible?”

“Roger, Vice-Commander.”

Hamaam and the others stayed just long enough for a drink from the well, then galloped off. *I wish we had e-mail in this world.*

At the rate things were going, Zagar’s downfall was all but guaranteed. The coastal nobles were more than ready to be rid of him. The moment he went back to Bahza, he’d either face a tribunal, or just be dismissed outright. Hell, they might even imprison or execute him.

The only problem is Zagar’s aware of that as well. Had he just done his job he would have been paid a nice sum and maybe given some medals, but he’d thrown those guaranteed profits away for some reason. Chances were he was after something valuable enough to be worth the risk. He was undoubtedly a dangerous man. As I was contemplating how to deal with him, Monza came over and sat down next to me.

“Man, I’m beat. Oh hey, is that my dinner? Mmm, it’s delicious!”

Smiling, Monza grabbed a whole leg of marinated grilled chicken and stuffed it into her mouth. That was actually my dinner, but she

ate it before I could say anything. If she was here, that meant she'd left tailing Zagar to someone else and was on break. *Come to think of it, the sun's about to set. She's been working for quite a while, huh?*

"Has he made a move yet?"

"Nope..." Monza replied with a bored look. "He drills his men in the mornings, reads strategy books or trains in the afternoons, and drinks with everyone at night. Sometimes he does night battle drills, but that's it."

Odd. He didn't strike me as the kind of guy who takes his job seriously.

"Oh, and sometimes he calls girls over in the night for some of that tail."

"Some of that...tail?"

Monza grinned and replied, "Well, you see, he brings Karfal's mistresses to his bed, and then he—"

"Nevermind, I get it now." I stopped Monza before she could do a crude pantomime of his sex acts with the chicken leg in her hand.

"Lord Karfal is married, but by Kuwolese law, nobles are allowed up to two mistresses. Stealing away those mistresses is a serious crime."

"Oh, does that mean we get to kill Zagar?" Monza asked excitedly, heedless of the sauce smeared on her lip. I shook my head and handed her a napkin.

"Unfortunately, those laws don't apply in wartime. Technically, mistresses can be taken as spoils of war by a commander who captures a city."

"Whoa, that's really crappy."

"I agree, but that's just how the law works here. Besides, we still need him to take down the king's royal guard, so we couldn't kill him even if we had a pretext. Granted, I'm not even sure he's gonna do that job anymore."

Even if we could get away with killing Zagar and the other key members of his troop, it was possible the rest of the mercenaries would still turn on the coastal nobles.

"The coastal alliance doesn't have any other commanders with experience in land warfare. Even Beluza's soldiers are meant to be a landing force that storms beaches and so on."

"Why don't you just take command then?"

"Don't be ridiculous. It's not as easy as it looks to command thousands of humans," I said with a weary sigh.

"Yeah, humans are suuuuper slow, and they can't even howl to each other from far away," Monza said with a grin.

"Pretty much."

Werewolves could move at great speeds, difficult terrain didn't slow them down, and they could use their howling to communicate in real time over long distances. Commanding them was like

coordinating a raid over chat in an MMO, so it was a lot easier than commanding regular people. Plus, they were able to hunt bears and deer to get their own food, and didn't care about where they slept.

Meanwhile, humans were weighed down by armor, and their padded helmets made it hard for them to even hear the sound of a trumpeter or drummer. You had to command troops with the understanding that there would be a time lag before your orders reached troops at the front lines, and their reports reached you. Moreover, they had a hard time fighting up slopes or other difficult terrain. On top of all that, you had to set up supply trains for them. Commanding was a hard job, and leading thousands on foreign soil without any knowledge of the local geography was even harder. The more people you had to take care of, the more things you needed to think about.

"I can only command a hundred or so humans at most."

That was fewer than three high school classrooms' worth. I'd have a hard time commanding those 100 troops if they weren't well-trained, too.

"I wish we could just take Zagar's commanding ability and leave the rest of him behind."

Just then, Monza's ears perked up.

"I smell Kumluk. He's got women with him."

"Oh—huh, you're right."

About a minute later, Kumluk walked into view. Behind him were the three girls who had been sent to my room that night. Today they were dressed in formal Kuwolese attire, and were standing at attention. They had impeccable manners, which made sense since they were a noble's maids.

"My apologies for what transpired a few nights ago, Lord Veight."

"Welcome, Sir Kumluk. Feel free to step inside."

Kumluk responded to my smile with one of his own, but I could smell the nervousness on him. He gave Monza a small bow, then turned back to me.

"Again, I'm terribly sorry for the misunderstanding that night. We are unaware of Meraldian customs, and Captain Zagar was worried he might have displeased you in some way."

Now that's a lie. However, I could tell he was lying out of consideration for me, so I let it slide. I nodded to him, and he wiped the sweat from his brow and added, "Perhaps this is a strange way of apologizing, but would you be willing to accept these women as assistants?"

I suddenly felt like teasing him a little bit. *No one will mind if I do, right?* I made a troubled face and looked like I was mulling it over.

"If we took them on as assistants, we would be the ones

responsible for their safety. With how few troops I have brought with me, that might prove a difficult task.”

Panicking, Kumluk hurriedly replied, “I-In that case why not leave them behind once we start marching to the capital? All three of them are literate so you could use them as secretaries if you want!”

Man, he's desperate. That being said, his proposal wasn't a bad one. The Meraldian army didn't have many people who could read and write Kuwolese. It was possible they were spies for Zagar, but if they were, a werewolf like me would sniff them out right away. We had evolved solely for hunting humans, so we held a lot of advantages over them. *Though, we've given up on eating people now, so those advantages aren't as useful...*

Kumluk gave me a worried look and hesitantly asked, “Umm, what do you say?”

Your merchant upbringing is showing through, Kumluk. I nodded to him with a smile. “That sounds like a wonderful proposal. I can't see any reason to refuse, and I imagine you'll lose face if I do, so I accept.”

The moment I said that, Kumluk's expression relaxed. “Thank you very much. Now I don't have to apologize to the captain. Also...”

“Also?”

Kumluk wiped his brow again and said in an extremely relieved voice, “It's reassuring to know that you'll be taking care of them, Lord Veight. As things stand, they have no one to protect them.”

Well yeah, Lord Karfal ran away. Kumluk was a regular citizen, so he didn't have the financial means or the social standing necessary to take care of girls like these. Mercenaries had very low social standing, and they were about as reviled as criminals. Even mercenary captains and vice-commanders weren't treated much better.

On the other hand, servants of a high-ranking noble were relatively high up on the social ladder themselves. They were given a proper education and were well known within the community. Oftentimes, they started businesses when they retired, and those businesses were usually successful. As a result, it would be frowned upon for a mercenary company to take them as spoils of war.

I grinned and replied, “I see you still haven't forgotten the lessons in nobility your parents taught you.”

“I often get told that I don't act like a mercenary.”

After talking to him, I honestly felt like he would be better off as a proper soldier than a mercenary. *Why'd he end up choosing this path?* Smiling to myself, I decided to stroke his ego a little, “That might be true, but that's also precisely why Captain Zagar values you so much, isn't it?”

As expected, his face lit up at that.

“You're right! Before, my comrades all thought I was worthless,

but Captain Zagar realized my value and promoted me to vice-commander! I hope to one day repay the huge debt I owe him!”

Well, that was unexpected. I meant to stroke his ego, but instead, I just strengthened his loyalty. *I can work with this too, though.* Now that I knew how to win Kumluk over, I changed the topic to Zagar, “Captain Zagar is a truly skilled commander. I can’t believe he hasn’t been made a general.”

“Just between us, he really wants to be one, but no one will give him the title.”

Oho.

“He used to work for the river nobles, fighting nomads and bandits. But no matter how many achievements he piled up, no one would appoint him as an officer, let alone a general.”

Can’t say I’m surprised. The guy’s a snake. Of course, while the river nobles hadn’t trusted Zagar, his men had absolute faith in him. I knew exactly why that was. Zagar hated the rich and powerful, and that message resonated with his mercenaries.

“We’re weaklings with swords. But one day we’ll be the ones standing on top. If that sword of yours hasn’t rusted yet, come with me and I’ll show you the future’...those were the words he said to me,” Kumluk said with a wistful expression.

In his mind, Zagar was a leader worthy of respect. *Look, I get why you worship him, but you really shouldn’t.* A guy whose only driving force was hatred for nobles couldn’t be allowed in a position of power. I had been a commoner in my past life and this one, but now I was technically a noble, since I’d married into a noble family. Of course there were nobility who abused their authority, but even so, I couldn’t really take Zagar’s side. Whether I could support him or not, though, the fact remained that he was the only able commander on the coastal nobles’ side. There was no one who could replace him. *I wonder if I can get any info about his skills out of Kumluk.*

“I know that Captain Zagar is skilled at land warfare, but could you tell me exactly how he conquered Karfal?”

“Oh, gladly.” Kumluk nodded, and I grinned to myself. “Even though Captain Zagar was appointed the supreme commander of the army, he personally led the charge against Karfal’s gates. It was amazing watching him run straight through that hail of arrows.”

“I heard the mercenary companies suffered heavy casualties during the assault.”

“Karfal’s garrison was waiting for us inside, so the fighting got fierce once we breached the gates. I don’t know the specifics, since I was commanding the force from the rear, but that’s what I heard.”

In other words, the mercenary companies that actually stormed the city were the ones who suffered the most losses. I guess the only reason

they weren't annihilated was because Lord Karfal surrendered.

Meanwhile, Zagar's company had leisurely entered the city once the fiercest of the fighting was over. By then, Lord Karfal's forces had been exhausted, so it was easy to take control of the city. The mercenaries who'd been injured during the fighting were all rescued by Zagar's company when he came, so they probably saw him as their hero. Of course, the ones who'd died during the fighting probably went down cursing his name, but they were all dead. The injured all received treatment from Zagar's camp, and he was even providing food for them now. The nobles who'd hired those mercenaries naturally weren't looking after them like that—they were just paying them whatever they'd agreed on and nothing more.

I could easily see how Zagar was able to get everyone else to both fear and respect him. He'd achieved something concrete by conquering the city, and everyone expected him to be appointed the supreme commander for the next battle as well. The mercenaries knew that if they didn't curry his favor, they'd be used as disposable pawns. It made sense that they were swearing fealty to Zagar instead of the other mercenary captains. Doing so was the only way to save themselves in the upcoming battle. Plus, they got fed for it, and they were allowed to pillage to their hearts' content.

Most of all, though, he was a general who could win. Mercenaries were the ones who suffered most during a loss, so a man like Zagar who could deliver victory was like a god to them. He had cleverly maneuvered himself into a position of strength and had united all the mercenary companies under him. The reason he had barred anyone but his own men from plundering captured cities was to further cement his authority. Those who followed him were able to share in the spoils of victory, and those who opposed him were executed.

Zagar's methods were primitive, but such primitive methods were exactly what you needed to control an unruly group of mercenaries. I wanted to cut this conversation short since I now had a better idea of the overall situation, but Kumluk was still waxing poetic about Zagar's various battlefield triumphs.

"One time, Captain Zagar faced down three hundred mounted nomads with just..."

"That sounds like an awfully interesting tale, but don't you have duties you need to be attending to, Sir Kumluk?"

"Actually, the captain gave me the rest of the day off. Now where was I?"

"You were talking about how Zagar faced down three hundred mounted nomads."

How can I get this guy to leave me alone? He'd been assigned to keep an eye on me so it would be hard to get rid of him as is, but if I

let him get comfortable, it'd be nigh impossible. While Kumluk was droning on, I heard one of Monza's squadmates whispering outside the door.

"I've got a report for the boss."

"You're gonna have to wait, he's stuck in a 'meeting,'" Jerrick, who was on guard duty, replied.

"It's urgent. The 'warhorse' is on the move."

They were using the code I had taught them. "In a meeting" meant there was someone from the mercenary troupe nearby, and "warhorse" referred to Zagar. In other words, Zagar was up to something. I wanted to hear the report as soon as possible, but I couldn't as long as Kumluk was here. The last thing I needed was for Zagar to find out that I was tailing him.

Just then, one of the maids Kumluk had brought with him spoke up.

"Lord Kumluk, I'm terribly sorry to interrupt, but there's something I forgot to tell you."

"What is it, Lady Shura?"

The woman known as Shura replied, "The paintings left in Lord Karfal's manor were all painted by Ruonico."

"They were?"

As the son of a merchant, Kumluk knew a decent amount about the fine arts. His expression paled and he shouted, "You mean Smiling Ruonico? The famous court painter who died far too young!? Oh no. I need to collect them before the other mercenaries get their hands on them!"

Kumluk jumped to his feet and bowed hastily to the maid.

"Thank you very much, Lady Shura. They'll likely have to be sold to fund our campaign regardless, but I can at least make sure they're properly taken care of and sold to a respected art dealer!" He then turned to me. "I'm terribly sorry Lord Veight, but this is urgent."

"No worries. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me, Sir Kumluk. You're welcome to come back any time."

I saw him off with a wave and a smile. Chances were, he was actually going back to make his report to Zagar. I was dying to know what that mercenary captain was getting up to, but before I heard my werewolves' report, I needed to discuss something with these maids. I could tell from her scent that the one known as Shura had been lying to Kumluk.

"Lady Shura?"

"It's as you suspect, Lord Veight." She inclined her head and added, "Lord Kumluk's presence appeared to pose a problem for you, so I devised a scheme to remove him."

"I take it there aren't actually any Ruonico paintings in the

mansion?"

Shura gave me a knowing smile.

"A genuine Ruonico painting could buy a dozen such mansions. There is no way Lord Karfal would let them fall into the hands of mercenaries. What remains in his mansion are replicas."

Damn. She's clever.

Shura bowed respectfully. "My apologies if I stepped out of line."

"Not at all; you were a huge help. Thanks."

"I am glad to have been of service."

Her grin grew wider, and the two maids behind her grinned as well. *These guys might be a lot more useful to have around than I thought. Anyway, I can think about what I'll do with them later. This report comes first.*

"Bad news, boss!" Monza's cousin, Damon, shouted the moment I walked out into the hallway. His partner, his father and Monza's uncle, was nowhere to be seen.

"What happened, Damon?"

"Zagar took thirty of his best men and rode out of the city!"

Thirty mounted warriors were more than two werewolves could handle on their own. I kept the number of observers on Zagar low at all times so as to not arouse suspicion, but it might have been better to have more people following him.

"This isn't one of his combat exercises or anything, right?"

Damon emphatically shook his head. "At first he took a thousand people with him, so I figured that's what he was doing. But then most of his men fell back, and Zagar kept riding on with his thirty men. That's when I ran back here so I could report it to you."

"Which direction did they go in?"

"South. They were heading upriver. I left dad to keep trailing them, but I'm worried about him being out there alone."

"Gotcha. Don't worry, your dad's one of the best hunters I know. He won't get caught by these fools."

That being said, the number of things a lone werewolf could accomplish was limited. We needed to rendezvous with him ASAP. Though, if I sent a large group after him, Kumluk would notice immediately. He wasn't here at the moment, but I had no doubt he left some of his men behind to keep an eye on us. I wanted the fact that we were keeping an eye on Zagar a secret at all costs. There was no telling what he would do if he felt threatened.

"Alright, have everyone from Monza's squad chase after Zagar. Vodd, have your squad go as backup. Make sure you use a different route than Monza's. Once you guys are out of the city you have permission to transform."

Monza and Vodd nodded.

“Ahaha, finally I can have some fun.”

“Sending a merc to deal with a merc, huh?”

I'm counting on you guys. Once Monza and Vodd left, I went back to the house I was using as a base of operations. Compared to the other houses on the street, it was pretty big. I was living here with its original inhabitants. We were staying here longer than intended, though they didn't seem to mind too much since we'd helped rebuild their house. I was only taking up a single room, but I still felt like I was intruding. Thankfully, it was just an old couple who lived here so there was a lot of extra space. Their son was running their fishing business now, and they were enjoying their retirement.

Soon after I returned to my room, the wife poked her head in.

“Mister General, do you have a moment?”

“What is it, miss?” I replied. *Is she gonna gift me more boiled fish?*

The old lady grinned and said, “There's a door from the kitchen that leads to the courtyard. The view of it is blocked from the outside by a large stack of wooden crates, so you can sneak out without anyone noticing.”

I immediately understood what she was getting at. She had prepared an escape route for me so that I could leave without being spotted by mercenaries.

“I talked to our neighbor, Shashar, too. She's put down planks from her roof to her neighbor's so you can cross over to Damad's place. From there you can go from building to building all the way to the market at the north gate.”

Kuwolese buildings had flat roofs, so people often went up there to dry laundry and the like. Shashar and Damad's roofs were still being repaired, so there were a bunch of bricks and planks and beams scattered all over them. It was nighttime now, so if I used magic to muffle my footsteps I could move without being seen or heard.

“Miss, how could you tell—”

Miss Paga grinned and replied, “Because, Mister General, you keep staring at the window looking like you're dying to leave.”

I can't believe even this old lady can see right through me.

She turned to the window. “And those odious mercenaries have been loitering around my house since last night. It wasn't hard to put two and two together.”

Just then, her husband walked into the room.

“Hey now, stop chatting with the general and let him leave. He's got more important things to do than talk with an old woman.”

“Come now. What's the harm? He repaired our house for us, and he's been protecting us from those mercenaries too.”

“Exactly. Which is why we're helping him escape, not talking his ear off. Come on sir, this way. The fish will rot if you wait any

longer.”

Is that some Kuwolese saying or something?

* * * *

—The Stirrings of Ambition: Part 2—

“Alright, this is the place.”

Zagar ordered his men to stop, and patiently waited atop his horse. He was in the ruins of an ancient city. Apparently, it used to sit at the bank of the Mejire, but because of the actions of a disbeliever, the river changed course away from them. Fearing the river’s curse, the people abandoned the city and built a new one elsewhere. That new city was Karfal.

Honestly, Zagar thought the whole tale was a load of bull. *As if a river could move on its own.* He looked down at the dark ground for a few seconds, then turned back to his aide.

“Did Rafhad succeed?”

“I think so...”

“If this plan fails, return to Karfal immediately and start setting up the defenses.”

His men looked visibly shaken.

“Defenses against what?”

“You guys sure are dumb.” Zagar grinned and turned to look in front of him. “When you’re on the battlefield, do you only expect arrows to come at you from the front? Spread out, it’s time.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

Zagar had a decent idea of what the coastal nobles were up to. When mercenaries started disobeying orders, it was only natural that their employers would cut them loose. But for the moment, Zagar’s employers were too far away to do anything. There was no one who could punish him.

There’s only one thing for a man to do when he’s at the head of an army and the capital’s in his sights. He was determined to use this opportunity to realize his ambitions. If this plan failed, he’d hole up in Karfal and become the city’s new ruler. Fortunately, Karfal was a stone’s throw away from the capital. If he continued gathering mercenary recruits, he would eventually be able to build up an army large enough to take it. The coastal nobles didn’t have any decent strategists, so they weren’t considered a threat in his eyes.

Actually, wait. He thought back to the foreign commander who’d come to the battlefield with less than 300 men. *I have no idea how Veight is going to act. I have more than 4,000 mercenaries working for me now so I should have an overwhelming advantage, but...* Zagar couldn’t help but shake the feeling that Veight could take on a few thousand

mercenaries all by himself. Of course, he knew in his head that was impossible, and he quashed down on his unease.

If I let him scare me, I've already lost. I've gotta keep it together.

Worse comes to worst, I can contact my nomad allies for help. Zagar had quite a few connections with the nomadic tribes that occasionally raided Kuwol, and he could easily muster a force of a few hundred cavalry at a moment's notice. He'd been pretending to fight them for years, while secretly building alliances instead. He made it look like he was achieving victories one after another, while he fed the nomads intel on what the caravans outside his patrol routes were up to. Nothing had happened to sour his relationship with the nomads, so he expected they would still help him.

As he was weighing all of his options, Zagar spotted a carriage approaching. The rider leading the carriage was Rafhad, one of Zagar's trusted men. Right now he was wearing the official robes of a bureaucrat. He'd stolen them off of one of Birakoya's messengers. There were about 20 or so royal guards protecting the carriage.

They came to a stop in the ancient city's central plaza, where Zagar and a few of his men were waiting. Torches were placed all around them, illuminating the area. The carriage door opened and a regally dressed young man stepped out of it. His crown gleamed in the torchlight. He was none other than Pajam the Second, Kuwol's king.

Zagar had seen the king in person before, though only once. In the past, he had been hired to guard one of Pajam's many royal villas. It had taken all of his connections and a number of bribes to get one of Pajam's attendants to get him the job. His hope had been that the prestige of guarding the king's residence would land him better jobs, and if he was lucky, maybe the king would even grant him an audience. However, in the end, he was unable to secure a meeting with any member of the royal family, let alone the king. No one had any interest in a mercenary who'd just been hired to beef up security.

Bearing the humiliation, Zagar had completed his guard duty faithfully. Luckily for him, Pajam the Second decided to visit the villa he was guarding during his time there. Apparently, he had wanted to take a boating vacation, and this villa was best-suited for that. Naturally, Zagar hadn't let this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity go to waste. He used every trick in his arsenal to make sure he'd end up somewhere the king could see him. He bribed the guards and attendants with women and money, and finally got assigned to the front gate where he could greet the king as he walked in. Zagar was confident that if he could just exchange words with the king, or at least get the king to look at him for a few seconds, the king would see his worth as a warrior and assign him some important post.

“Your Majesty. This is Zagar, the mercenary captain who has been assigned to guard your villa for a time.”

One of the attendants Zagar had bribed introduced him to the king as he passed on his palanquin. This was the moment Zagar had been dreaming of. However, Pajam had barely spared Zagar a single glance before turning back and ordering his palanquin bearers to keep moving. They pushed Zagar aside and took him into the villa, closing the gates behind them. That was the only interaction Zagar ever had with his king.

The king might remember what I look like, so I won't be able to pass myself off as Veight any longer. Zagar dismounted from his horse, but he wasn't sure whether he should kneel or not. Like all the other mercenaries, he had his shield in his left hand, so if he knelt on his right knee it would mean exposing his right arm and revealing that he was armed. Moreover, it would make it difficult to move his shield around. His instincts as a warrior rebelled against going into a position of weakness like that.

The king frowned, and Rafhad hurriedly explained, “Th-This is Lord Veight, the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander.”

“Are you ignorant of Kuwol's customs, Lord Veight? The least you could do is offer a bow in the Meraldian style.”

Zagar was stunned. *He doesn't remember me!?* Zagar knew that the king met many people every day, and he likely didn't remember most of them. However, he'd wanted to believe that he, at least, was special. *I'm not like all those other mediocre idiots! How can you not remember me!? Are you such a bad judge of character that you didn't realize I'm different!?* For the first time in ages, Zagar felt rage bubbling up inside him. At first, he had been uncertain, but now he was determined not to kneel to this king. It wasn't as though he was here to negotiate, anyway. Especially now that the king had wounded his pride by not even deigning to remember him.

“You can drop the act, Rafhad,” Zagar said with a shake of his head. “It's dawn.”

At his signal, a number of fishing nets came tumbling down from the nearby roofs. They were all painted pitch black. Caught completely by surprise, the royal guard were unable to get out of the way in time and found themselves entangled.

“Wh-What the hell is this!?”

“We're under attack!”

“Protect the king!”

“Wait, if you move now—”

The knights tried to raise their spears, but that only got them more tangled by the nets. As most of the mercenaries were from

peasant backgrounds, they knew how to handle nets. Fishing nets were an indispensable tool for any commoner in Kuwol. Everyone lived off of the Mejire's bounty, so they knew how to take as much as they could from it. However, the royal guard were mostly of noble birth and had no idea how commoners' tools worked. Their struggling only served to get their comrades caught in the nets as well. Meanwhile, the mercenaries mercilessly rained arrows down upon the knights.

"Ngh!"

"Uwaaah!"

A number of knights fell from their horses and were trampled underfoot by the same animals that had fought with them for so long. In just seconds, the king's entire retinue was slain.

"You scoundrel! Do Meraldians have no honor!?"

Pajam glared at Zagar, but there was no one left to protect him now. Zagar scoffed and replied, "I'm not Veight. I'm the mercenary captain you met way back when. This is what you get for underestimating me. Now kneel."

To the Kuwolese, the king was a living descendant of Mondstrahl and the rightful ruler of the land. But Zagar, a common citizen, pointed his sword at Pajam without hesitation.

"Did you not hear me? Or is the great king of Kuwol unwilling to show proper respect to his betters?"

Pajam glared at Zagar, but after a few seconds, the anger faded from his eyes and was replaced by a look of pity and disdain. That infuriated Zagar even more than Pajam's anger.

"You better not think your fancy title is going to save you here," he spat. Zagar jerked his head, and a number of his subordinates grabbed the king by the arms.

"Unhand me, you insolent peasants!" the king yelled.

For a second, the mercenaries hesitated, but then Zagar calmly said, "Don't listen to him. Pin him down."

Zagar was much more of a king to the mercenaries than Pajam. Swallowing their trepidation, they pushed the royal down. Unable to resist, Pajam fell to one knee and knelt in front of Zagar.

"There, that's better. A moron who can be lured out by a fake messenger doesn't deserve to rule."

Pajam said nothing as Zagar gloated. He simply continued looking at the mercenary captain with contempt.

"What's wrong? Cat got your tongue?" Zagar said, pointing his sword at the king. After a few seconds, he realized the reason for Pajam's silence. "What? You think I'm not even worth talking to, you bastard?"

That was indeed how Pajam felt. He sneered derisively, which was

enough to push Zagar over the edge.

“Then die, you fuck!”

He swung his scimitar down on the powerless king. The blade bit deep into Pajam’s shoulder, and fresh blood spurted from the wound. The king’s limp body fell to the ground; he’d been killed instantly.

“C-Captain!?”

“Did you just kill the king!?”

“You’ll be cursed!”

The mercenaries were aghast, but Zagar just wiped the blood from his blade and smiled.



“There is no such thing as curses. They say the king’s blood is golden, just like the moon’s, but look. It’s boring old red. He’s human, just like us. All those stories were bullshit.”

Even the mercenaries who weren’t religious still knew how heinous a crime it was to kill a king. Realizing that light-hearted banter wouldn’t assuage their fears, Zagar said, “There’s no turning back now for any of you. The sentence for abetting regicide is death. You can make all the excuses you want, but we’re all marked for execution now.”

The mercenaries’ faces paled. Zagar waited until their fear peaked, then smiled brightly and kicked some dirt onto the king’s corpse. He was actually tempted to step on it, but even he was just a little superstitious.

“If you want to survive, the only option left to all of you is to help me conquer this country. Would you rather end up dangling from a noose or become a noble?”

“Well... I-If those are the only two choices, I pick noble,” someone said with a nervous gulp. Zagar’s smile grew wider.

“Not a hard choice, right? Come on, let’s go get some titles for all of you. Don’t worry, I already have a plan. As long as you do what I say, this country will be ours.”

“C-Can you really do it?” another mercenary asked, and Zagar shrugged his shoulders.

“Sure. Honestly, this plan is so simple I feel like an idiot for not trying it sooner.”

The mercenaries started muttering to each other.

“Is it really gonna be that easy?”

“D’you think he can do it?”

“It’s not like we’ve got any other choice anyway, right?”

“Has the captain ever asked us to do the impossible?”

“Good point. Maybe he really can pull this off.”

Once the mercenaries started to calm down, Zagar unveiled his plan.

“We’re the only people who know the king died here. And if we keep it that way, the world will just think he’s missing. Forever.”

“O-Oh yeah! No one knows we killed him!”

The mercenaries breathed a collective sigh of relief. Zagar went around to finish off the few members of the royal guard that were still alive.

“We can just tell everyone he was scared of the coastal nobles and ran off in the night. No one’s gonna follow a king who ran away from his throne so... Hey, don’t loot these guys’ armor. Even if you sell it off, it’s evidence we don’t need floating around. Dump all the bodies

in the old well.”

He lazily stabbed another knight through the heart.

“I’ve got connections with some people in the palace. I did some pretty shady jobs for them back in the day, so they owe me. I’ve already talked things over with them, too.”

Zagar’s ties to the royal palace weren’t quite as tight as he was playing them up to be, but none of the mercenaries had any way of knowing that. Just in case there was anyone who still didn’t get the plan, he drove it home one last time.

“All we did tonight was a regular training drill. Got it? Now let’s clean up these random corpses we found during our excursion and get out of here. I’ll treat everyone to some nice aged rum when we get back, along with some sheep steak.”

The mercenaries cheered. While they were busy disposing of the corpses, Zagar called one of his men over.

“Rafhad, come over here for a sec.”

The man dressed in Birakoya’s messenger’s clothes padded over to the corner where Zagar waited.

“What’s up, Captain?”

“You did a good job of pretending to be a messenger. But unfortunately...”

Zagar drew his dagger and thrust it into Rafhad’s throat, covering the man’s mouth to make sure he couldn’t scream.

“Bw—!?”

“There are too many people who recognize your face now. I can’t bring you with me, but I can’t just cut you loose either—so I’m afraid you must die.”

There was no reply. Rafhad was already dead. Zagar looked down at the corpse of his loyal subordinate and resheathed his dagger.

“I’ll tell the others you’re on a covert mission. It’s not really a lie, if you think about it.”

Zagar walked out of the shadows of the building he’d been hiding in and called out to the others.

“Hurry up everyone, we’ve got a kingdom to take!”

* * * *

By the time I left Karfal, my fellow werewolves’ scents were pretty far away. I wouldn’t be able to catch up to them if I didn’t transform. For the first time in months, I assumed my wolf form and sprinted through the night.

Far off in the distance, I heard Monza howl, “Come quick.”

Believe me, I’m trying. Across a quiet, wide-open plain a werewolf’s howl could be heard from a few kilometers away. I was worried I might not be able to find the source of the howl, but then I spotted

Vodd standing atop a nearby hill.

“Oh good, there you are. I thought I might be lost.”

“I knew you’d say that. I was taking a short break here so I figured may as well wait for you. Monza’s squad is pretty far up. We can go together.”

The grizzled veterans of Vodd’s squad grinned at me. Working as a group was one of the basic rules of a hunt. Together with Vodd’s squad, I reached some old ruins. Whatever city had once stood here had been pretty big, though not quite as large as Karfal. Making sure to avoid Zagar’s party, we detoured around and entered the ruins from the west.

“I can’t believe they made a city here once. There’s nothing for miles. Look, they’ve even got a pier even though there’s no water.”

“Ahh, my guess is the Mejire used to run through this area in the past. Rivers cut through the dirt and pile it up around them so the direction of their flow is always changing slowly.”

“I see. I guess that means they abandoned this place once the river went somewhere else.”

While we were speculating on the city’s past, we noticed something strange.

“I smell blood.”

“Yeah, there must have been knights here—around twenty of them.”

“You can even tell the number, Vodd?”

Grinning, Vodd and his squadmates pointed to the ground.

“You can see how many hoofprints are coming in from the south. They’re pretty deep, so these horses were carrying something heavy, like knights in full armor, or maybe pulling a carriage.”

“If it was a carriage, the hoofprints would be single-file, but these are double-file. It’s gotta be knights.”

“Yeah. And if the hoofprints were coming from the north we’d know they were the mercs, but they’re not.”

“Also, there are ruts off to the side here, so there was also a carriage—and that definitely couldn’t have belonged to the mercs.”

The old men’s explanations made me realize I’d been so focused on tracking the scent that I’d forgotten to use my other senses as well. *These veterans are on a whole different level.*

The deeper we got into the ruins, the stronger the scent of blood became. It seemed we were too late to prevent whatever had happened. The scent was at its strongest at the center of the ruined city. It was obvious from the blood soaking the dirt that something had gone down here. There were also a number of warhorses lying dead in the plaza. I couldn’t see the knights that had been riding them anywhere, but I could smell fresh blood in the well, so it wasn’t hard

to guess where they'd gone.

"Hey, boss," Monza said with a cheerful wave and walked over to me. Thankfully, it looked like Zaimon, Monza's uncle, was alive and well, too.

The expert hunter walked over to me and said, "Hullo, Veight. Sorry I couldn't stop them. It was hard enough just staying hidden."

"Don't worry about it. I'm just glad you're safe, Zaimon. So what happened?"

"Well, about that..."

Zaimon briefly summarized what Zagar had done. *Holy crap. This is bad. Like, really bad.*

"Get those corpses out of the well right now. Find the one that's dressed in nice clothes and looks relatively young."

Before long, they dragged out a corpse wearing gold-embroidered finery. His clothes had the crest of Kuwol's royal family on them. He was also still wearing his bloodstained crown, so his identity was unmistakable. This man was the late king of Kuwol, Pajam the Second. Of course, it was always possible this was just a body double, but only someone of high standing would be able to afford the perfume he had been wearing. Moreover, as far as I knew, no Kuwolese king in history had used a body double, so he was probably the real deal. I never expected my first meeting with the king of Kuwol would be like this. Unfortunately, he was way past saving. He'd been dead so long that magic couldn't resuscitate him either.

"Poor guy."

I brought my hands together in prayer for the dead king. The other werewolves weren't aware of Buddhist customs, but they followed suit anyway. Pajam had been a worthless king who couldn't lead, couldn't fight, and couldn't strategize to save his life, but he hadn't been a tyrant who deserved an end like this.

"Zagar's the one who killed him, Veight. I saw him do it with my own two eyes." Zaimon bit his lip in frustration. "I'm sorry. I wanted to save him, but there were too many archers around. There was nothing I could have done alone."

"Don't apologize. You made the right choice. Besides, you wouldn't even be able to report this to me if something had happened to you—so thank you." I patted him on the shoulder. "Plus, aren't you the one who's always saying 'when you're on a hunt, don't attack until you've cornered your prey?'"

Werewolves only struck once the tracking phase was over, and their quarry had let their guard down. Allowing your prey to escape or to fight back was unacceptable, which was why werewolves never engaged their prey when victory was uncertain. Thanks to his stealthy tracking, we now knew what Zagar was up to, and he had no clue.

What happened to the king and his knights was a shame, but it wasn't something we could have prevented.

Zaimon smiled faintly at me. "Thanks, Veight. By the way, Zagar lured the king out by using your name. He pretended to be you and asked for a meeting here."

"What!?"

"The aide who guided the king here introduced Zagar as you. Seeing as he wasn't killed in the assault, he was probably one of Zagar's mercenaries, or someone Zagar got to betray the king. I'm not as good at Kuwolese as you, so I couldn't make it all out."

This just gets worse and worse.

"But then Zagar killed him later too. His corpse is over here."

I followed Zaimon to the corner of one of the ruined buildings and found a corpse dressed like a bureaucrat.

"This is what messengers wear when they need to ride. That crest on his coat is the Bahza family coat of arms."

"Does that mean one of Lord Bahza's messengers betrayed her?" Monza asked, crouching down and poking the body. I grabbed her hand to make her stop.

"Hey, don't play with the corpses. Anyway, remember how Zagar's underlings were assassinating Lord Bahza's messengers? They probably stole their clothes while they were at it. I bet you this guy was one of Zagar's men."

"Then why'd Zagar kill him? So he wouldn't talk?"

"Probably."

This has turned into a real mess.

"Hey, boss, what's gonna happen now? Is Kuwol gonna collapse?"

"It just might. The king himself isn't that important, but the system where everyone reveres the king is how Kuwol's current government is set up."

No matter what happened, no noble openly attacked the king. On the surface, they continued to show him respect and defer to him. It was the unwritten contract all Kuwolese nobles abided by. Occasionally, disputes between noble families broke out, but if the king said to stop, everyone stopped. The knowledge that the king could step in and be the final arbitrator gave everyone a sense of security. The king didn't actually have many troops under his direct control, and the amount of land he controlled was small. It wasn't his military or economic might that unified the nation.

To use a sports analogy, the king wasn't one of the players; he was the referee. The players and spectators both had no choice but to abide by his decrees. Killing the referee meant ignoring the unspoken laws that bound Kuwol's major players and throwing the nation into chaos. It was no different than a baseball star assassinating the umpire

the night before a championship match. If something like that happened, it wouldn't be a match that got played the next day.

This was why regicide in Kuwol was such a taboo. Zagar had gone and done something a normal Kuwolese person wouldn't even dream of attempting. Up until now, this civil war had been a controlled boxing match, but now there was a real-deal killer in the ring. If word of this got out, there was no telling how the other nobles would react. Things were not looking good. I explained the overall situation to my werewolves, then ordered them to stuff the king's corpse back into the well.

"I'd like to give him a proper burial, but considering the situation, we can't let anyone know we were here. That means we can't take anything from here back with us to Karfal either."

If we did recover anything from the crime scene and someone found out, we'd be the primary suspects for the king's murder. The diplomatic repercussions of that would extend all the way to Meraldia. *Sorry for leaving you in this sorry state, Your Majesty. And you as well, unknown man who was betrayed by Zagar. I swear I'll get revenge for you.*

Monza shot me a questioning glance. "So are we gonna off Zagar, then? If you want him assassinated, I could get it done tonight."

"It wouldn't be hard, but we need him alive for now."

"Why?"

"Because we're not a hundred percent certain this is really the king. Even if it is, we can't just kill Zagar. He's still technically under Lord Bahza's employ, so if it's revealed that he killed the king, she would be implicated. The political situation would become a huge mess."

Birakoya Bahza was Meraldia's biggest ally in Kuwol. The last thing I wanted was her taking the fall for Zagar's actions—especially since she herself had followed the rules and shown the royal family proper respect.

"Also, if we kill Zagar, the four thousand mercenaries under his command are going to turn into a disorderly mob. Without him leading them, they're no better than bandits. And we don't have the manpower to subjugate them if they go rogue."

There was no telling what these mercenaries would do without their leader. Hell, they might even turn on the coastal noble army marching in from the rear. If that happened, Karfal's citizens would suffer even more than they already had. We would have to defeat them with just my werewolves and Beluza's forces, and even if we won that fight, we'd suffer heavy casualties. Moreover, Lord Karfal was still alive, and likely gathering men to try and retake his city. *The capital will probably fall into chaos before long too, since they'll realize the king is missing.* If foreigners like us tried to use force to resolve things,

we'd just earn the ire of every faction. On the other hand, diplomacy could be quite effective here. If I could get the various factions to sit down at the negotiating table, I could probably resolve things amicably *and* make sure Zagar gets his just deserts.

As a Meraldian diplomat, I was technically not involved in this civil war. I also happened to be the only person right now with a full picture of what was going on. And unlike Zagar, I had more than one option available to me. One mistake would lead to everything crumbling like a house of cards, but this situation was still salvageable. *I can work with this.*

"Seeing as he's gone as far as killing the king, it's obvious what Zagar is after. Unfortunately, I'm going to have him take responsibility for what he's done."

"Can you really do that?"

"I have to. Otherwise, the whole nation's going to be engulfed in war."

Please stop burning everything to the ground. I need your sugarcane fields, guys.

"I want a squad monitoring these ruins at all times. Make sure no one sees you, and take note of every person who comes in and out of here."

I doubted Zagar himself would ever return to this place, but he might send some of his men to erase all traces of his crime and perhaps even fabricate false evidence. I needed someone on the lookout in case he did. The problem was, I was running out of squads to assign lookout duty to.

"Zagar wants to be king, but there's no way that's happening," I said, and all of my werewolves gave me confused looks.

"Why not?" Monza asked.

"Because I'm going to stop him," I replied with a feral grin.

You're gonna regret making an enemy out of me, Zagar.

Inherited Wills

“I want to buy as many necessities as I can over there so I don’t have to pack too much, but I’ll probably need to take at least a few sets of formal wear, huh?” Veight said to Airia as he packed his luggage for the voyage to Kuwol.

Airia smiled at him and replied, “You certainly will need spares in case you rip them by transforming. See, I was right to have extra pairs ordered for you, wasn’t I?”

“Thank you for your infinite wisdom, Airia. I won’t have to worry about ripping a pair or two now.”

They were rather expensive though, so I wish you would treat them with more care. Airia thought, but didn’t say. Ultimately, what mattered most to her was Veight returning home safe and sound. If he had to rip a few expensive pieces of clothing for that, so be it.

As Veight carefully folded his clothes into his suitcase, he said, “If something happens while I’m away that you can’t discuss with the council...like a potential mutiny or something...turn to the demon army for help. I know Master will give you her full support, and you can trust Melaine and Firnir too. They’re all part of your family now.”

“Don’t worry, I know.” Airia’s smile widened. “Like you keep saying, this shaky coexistence between humans and demons could shatter at any time. There’s no telling what might lead to discord in the future, so I promise I’ll keep my demon allies close.”

“Good. At this point, things are probably stable, but it never hurts to be too cautious.” Veight sighed and grabbed Airia’s hand. “I’m sorry I have to go while you’re still pregnant.”

“You really don’t have to worry about it. Besides, I’m the one who ordered you to go.” Airia gave Veight’s hand a reassuring squeeze, drawing strength from it.

— *From Veight, to Airia.*

A few days later.

“Thank you for taking the time to come all the way here, Forne. Our next council meeting will be quite productive, I think.”

Airia rose to her feet to see Forne off. However her condition still wasn’t perfect, and she staggered a little.

“Ah...”

Forne nonchalantly reached over to steady her. He clearly had

experience helping people with morning sickness. Once Airia was steady he stepped back and said with a smile, "Please don't push yourself on my account. I'm a man so I can't say I know what pregnancy feels like, but I do realize it must be tough on you."

"M-My apologies. It seems I'm still feeling a little under the weather."

Forne sighed in exasperation. "Of course you are, you're pregnant. Don't bother seeing me off, just go rest."

"Thank you for your concern, but I can't afford to rest while my husband is out fighting."

"Don't be silly. Veight wouldn't want you pushing yourself either. As a married man myself, I can say with certainty that it would pain him to see you neglect your health." Forne gently pushed Airia back down onto the sofa before turning toward the door. "Fear not, I shall take care of everything while the esteemed Lord Veight is away."

— *From Airia, to Forne.*

"Now then, it's about time we got started," Forne said, and the men gathered around him nodded silently.

They were in a VIP booth in one of Veira's larger playhouses. It was the room Forne preferred to use for clandestine meetings. The men around him were the viceroys of neighboring cities, and the representatives or family members of the viceroys who were too far away to come in person. However, Melaine, Firnir, and Airia were not present. Shatina and Woroy were conspicuously absent as well. In other words, all of the demon army's staunchest supporters were missing. The viceroys and representatives waited with bated breath for Forne's next words.

"I've mapped out the demon army's movements for the past few months. I can't leave any written evidence behind, so I'm afraid you'll have to just memorize what I'm about to tell you." Forne didn't even bother looking at his memo as he spoke. "First of all, in both a diplomatic and military sense, we absolutely need the demon army's strength to keep Rolmund in check. You all do realize what would happen if we cut ties with the demon army here, right?"

Forne waited for everyone to nod before continuing.

"Rolmund's current empress, Eleora, is only on friendly terms with Meraldia because of her personal connection to Veight. If we end up having a falling out with him, she might very well decide to invade."

The northern viceroys nodded in unison once more.

"In fact, the demon army might even help her conquer us..." one person said.

"In which case our careers would be over," another chimed in. "We would have no hope against a combined Rolmund-Demon Army

coalition.”

Most of the elite knights that had served the Senate were working for the demon army now too, since they were paying them better and giving them higher status. It was hard to imagine they’d throw all those perks away to serve under the viceroys if it came to choosing between one or the other. The northern viceroys who were closest to Rolmund sighed.

“Vexing though it is to admit, we’ve had our swords stolen from us.”

“Yes, there’s no point in complaining about it now. If we wanted to break ties with the demon army, we would have to raise the funds for our own military, but by now, is there honestly even any need for that?” Forne said with a casual shrug, and everyone nodded, but then his expression grew serious and he added, “However, there is one recent administrative change that requires our scrutiny. The new Meraldian University.”

“What’s the problem with it, Forne?” Aram asked, cocking his head.

Forne sighed and replied, “Everyone but you has already realized it, Aram. All of Meraldia’s elite want their children attending that university. That’s extremely significant.”

“Well, it is slated to be the most advanced university in the nation. If you’re accepted, you’ll be able to build connections with the demon army, too.”

The existence of Airia and the Demon Knights proved that even humans could hold powerful positions within the demon army. Naturally, the nobles and wealthy merchants of Meraldia wanted to work their way in.

Forne quietly explained, “This nation’s future viceroys are all becoming friends with the demon army’s teachers and officers. Because of this, they have a favorable impression of the demon army as well. In a decade, we’ll see the rise of a pro-Demon Lord faction.”

“Ah, I see. That does make sense.”

“Even if we wanted to break off from the demon army, by the time we’ve amassed enough power to do so, half of the cities will be ruled by pro-demon viceroys. Our Black Werewolf King is an unbelievably farsighted politician.” Forne let out an exaggerated sigh and put a hand to his temple. “For both military and diplomatic reasons, we have no choice but to stick with the demon army—and considering recent affairs, it’s going to have to stay that way for the foreseeable future.”

One of the northern viceroys’ aides muttered, “So you’re saying the demon army’s...going to be here forever?”

“Pretty much. No matter what we do now, we won’t be able to

beat the demon army.”

“Understood. I shall convey that to my master.”

Everyone nodded in agreement. Once the meeting was over, Forne and Aram went out to the terrace to share a drink.

“You’re quite the actor, Forne.”

“Ahaha. I used to act in quite a few plays back in the day,” Forne said with a bashful smile. Aram poured an amber-colored liquid into his crystal glass and smiled back at him.

“You put on this whole show because you want to strengthen the ties between the demon army and the northern viceroys, didn’t you?”

“Of course. Among the southern viceroys, I’m the one with the most connections to the north. I’m tired of war, so I’d like it if everyone could be friends.” Forne looked out at the setting sun. “Veight is a man who understands people’s needs. On top of that, he’s kind to a fault and dislikes violence. So long as we come to him in good faith, he’ll do his best to accommodate us. We could ask for no greater ally.”

“Unfortunately, the northern viceroys still hold a grudge over the demon army’s invasion. I doubt they’ll trust Veight so easily.”

“Indeed. Not all humans are wise, either. Plenty of us are fools who work only in self-interest, or for the sake of some warped ideals. We need to keep an eye on things to make sure no one does anything rash.”

Aram gave Forne a concerned look. “Is the situation in Meraldia really that unstable?”

“I suppose there’s no real need to worry. However, right now, Veight is in Kuwol. The last thing I want is for problems at home while he’s busy elsewhere. Besides...”

“Besides, what?”

“I’d rather not entertain this thought, but on the off chance that Veight is slain in Kuwol, it’ll fall to us to maintain this precarious peace he worked so hard to create. I’m just being extra cautious because I know I can’t leave this job to anyone else.” Forne shrugged his shoulders as he said that. “Though, I doubt the invincible Black Werewolf King would kick the bucket in a small civil war like that. Chances are, he’ll be back in a month and we’ll be hearing tales of his heroic exploits.”

“For sure.”

— *From Forne, to Aram*

A few days after Forne’s secret meeting, Aram went to visit Woroy. As he looked up at the half-built city, Aram wiped a bead of sweat from his brow and murmured, “Wow, this is quite a sight.”

The coliseum that would serve as the city center was larger than

any theater or arena Aram had ever seen. Traders from Shardier, Aram's city, were spreading imported sand all over the coliseum floor. Woroy folded his arms and grinned.

"Thanks, Aram. The sand used in arenas needs to have good drainage, but also not form large dust clouds, or the spectators won't be able to see anything. The grains need to be fine enough that the fighters won't get badly hurt, but not so fine that their feet sink. Shardier's sand is the only type that fits the bill."

Aram smiled back and said, "I never imagined that our city's sand, of all things, would end up being a product. Especially considering how abundant it is."

"Hahaha, I'm going to be making plenty more orders for Shardier sand, don't you worry. I'll be counting on your boys for a while yet." Woroy turned to look at the city sector still under construction and suddenly said, "Meraldia's trying to achieve something no nation has ever attempted before. I'm glad I get to be a part of it. I'll be sure to pull my weight so I don't drag you guys down."

"What do you mean, 'trying to achieve something no one's attempted before?'" Aram asked, confused. "Are you referring to making a place where humans and demons can coexist, Woroy?"

"That's part of it, but Meraldia's goals are bigger than just that. As far as I know, no other nation has succeeded in becoming a place that's open to people of all races and religions. In fact, I don't think anyone else has even tried." Woroy frowned and added, "In Rolmund, we had a hard enough time getting humans to get along with each other. We've had a bunch of bloody wars fought between the Sonnenlicht and Sternenfeuer followers. We've even had wars between differing Sonnenlicht sects. Humans have a deep-seated problem with accepting things they see as 'other.'"

"Come to think of it, Rolmund's and Meraldia's versions of Sonnenlicht interpret the scriptures pretty differently too, huh?"

"Yeah. We're supposed to be sharing the same faith, but there's tons of people who'd say one side or the other are heretics."

Aram was a Mondstrahl follower so he didn't know much about Sonnenlicht, but he knew there were various Mondstrahl sects in Kuwol that all feuded with each other.

Woroy's expression grew even grimmer as he said, "People are willing to slaughter each other over the tiniest differences in values. They tell themselves 'those other people aren't like us,' which makes it okay to kill them and dehumanize the other side."

"Indeed..."

"That's why most nations unite their people with a single set of laws, religion, language, and values. Anyone who steps out of line is immediately shunned. Anything different from the norm is

unacceptable. It's the only way to maintain order."

"That's exactly why the Senate failed. They were wise enough not to force Mondstrahl believers to convert, but they still treated them poorly. As a result, most of southern Meraldia ended up alienated."

"There you go. But on the other hand, if they'd given 'heretics' equal treatment, the north would have complained instead. The Senate didn't understand that they were walking on a tightrope, and they failed because of it."

Aram was once again reminded of how precarious a position the Meraldian Commonwealth was in. *Forne isn't being overly cautious, he has every right to be as worried as he is.*

Noticing that Aram had lapsed into thought, Woroy turned back to him and said, "Oh, I didn't mean to insult Meraldia's ambitions. If anything, I think it's a goal worth having precisely because of how difficult it is to pull off. You're trying to do the same thing, aren't you?"

"I am?"

"I've heard about the lengths you're going to in order to assimilate the desert nomads into your city. You didn't marry the daughter of a nomad tribe's elder just because you love her, that's for sure."

"True, it's as you say. I thought joining our two families would help bring us closer together. Personally, I think if we stop treating the nomads like outcasts, they'll stop raiding our caravans."

Bandit troubles were one of Shardier's biggest problems. Aram couldn't just send an army to subjugate the nomads either, since they weren't just raiders. They also traded their livestock for clothes and other necessities, and they had deep ties with the villages around the city. Instead of trying to eliminate them, Aram had decided to slowly forge a relationship of trust, and was now encouraging nomads to move to Shardier. As part of his efforts, he had also gotten engaged to a nomad woman.

Aram scratched his head and said, "That being said, it's not strictly a political marriage. If I didn't truly love her, I wouldn't have proposed. She's as gentle as the moon on a quiet desert night, and as caring as an oasis. She also looks captivating when she's galloping across the dunes on horseback."

Woroy grinned at that. "I didn't think you were the kind of person to brag about their wife, Aram."

"Oh, uhh, sorry. Now I'm embarrassed."

Aram blushed and looked away. Unsure of how to respond, Woroy just stared awkwardly at him. It was rare to see a legendary warrior like Woroy look stumped, but after a few seconds he went back to his usual cheerful smile.

"I guess Rolmundians and Meraladians both make the same kind of

face when they're bragging about their sweethearts."

"Where did that come from?"

"Well...the way you looked just now was really nostalgic, that's all."

"Nostalgic? I see." Aram cocked his head, but then remembered what Forne had told him earlier. "Woroy."

"Yeah?"

"I'm a Mondstrahl believer from the south, so my upbringing and religion are totally different from yours. But even then, the two of us are here, working together towards a common goal. I think that's a really, really good thing."

For a moment, Woroy looked taken aback, but then he laughed, "Ahahaha. It's kinda embarrassing when you put it bluntly like that! If your wife is the moon, then you're Meraldia's sun, Aram. You're bright, cheerful, and bring everyone fortune!"

"I-I don't think I—"

"No need to be humble. Not everyone would accept an exiled noble like me—especially since the country I fled from still wants my head. Take pride in yourself, Aram." Woroy patted Aram on the back. "There's a lot that's different about us, but we're both walking down the same path. I hope we can continue to do so for a long time to come."

He then held out his hand for a handshake. Aram timidly gripped it, marveling at how much bigger and rougher it was than his own.

Smiling like an innocent young boy, Woroy asked, "By the way Aram, would you like to try a game of battleball?"

"I'm not really a fan of violent sports..."

— *From Aram, to Woroy*

After Aram left, Woroy got back to work. He needed to inspect all the buildings currently under construction and prepare a proper welcome for the incoming residents. He also needed to draft a charter of laws and a tax code and meet with the other exiled Rolmund nobles. By the time he was done with all of that, there were more new buildings for him to inspect, and the cycle began anew.

I miss fighting the Nue in Wa. Back then, he'd had far fewer responsibilities. He could fight freely, with no subordinates to protect or land to manage. Things had been simple. A fight to the death against a deadly monster with trusted comrades at his back. It had been such a thrilling experience that Woroy doubted he would ever forget it. *If I didn't have my family name and Ryuunie to take care of, I think I really would just give all this fame and authority up and become a wandering warrior.* Sighing, Woroy went back to inspecting buildings. He knew from experience that checking up on the workers in person

and hearing their grievances was important for a leader.

As he was making the rounds, a familiar face walked up to him.

“Prince Woroy!”

“I’m not a prince anymore, Myurei.”

As Myurei was Ryuunie’s best friend, Woroy had met him a few times. Like always, Myurei looked a little nervous in Woroy’s presence. He looked like he was trying his hardest not to mess up.

“R-Ryuunie said I gotta see, er...I mean, he invited me over to observe how the city’s construction has progressed.”

“Well, it’s an honor to have a future viceroy like you here, Sir Myurei. We welcome you with open arms. By the way, where is Ryuunie?”

Myurei hung his head and said, “I’m afraid your vassals caught him. He’s busy listening to their reports on building blueprints and street designs.”

“You two may be friends, but right now you’re a guest. I’ll have to scold him later for showing you such poor hospitality. Allow me to apologize on his behalf.”

“N-Not at all! He’s crazy popular—err, I mean, he’s clearly beloved by the residents of this city, and he’s able to provide valuable advice so it’s only natural that they would seek his opinion. He can actually do things, unlike me.”

Seeing Myurei try to cover for his friend, Woroy smiled.

“There’s no need to put yourself down like that. Veight would be sad if he heard you say that.” He placed a reassuring hand on Myurei’s shoulder. “You’re a promising young man. You’re good with both the pen and the sword, and you’ve got even more drive than Ryuunie. If we were back in Rolmund, I’d be willing to put a hundred knights under your command.”

“Really, a hundred!?”

“Yep. And since each knight is accompanied by a lance, you would actually have a few hundred men.”

“Th-That many!?”

“I mean it, you know. When you grow up and become the viceroy of Lotz, I’ll give you your own five hundred-man unit as a gift.”

“No way!”

Myurei’s jaw dropped open. Meraldian military units were generally smaller than Rolmund ones, so to a Meraldian, 500 men was a huge number. After seeing Myurei’s reaction, Woroy felt compelled to ask a question that had been burning at him for the past few days.

“Myurei. Meraldia is filled with demons and humans from all different backgrounds and religions. Why do you think there isn’t any strife between these groups?”

Myurei looked taken aback by the question, but he didn’t have to

think hard for a reply, “Isn’t that because there are amazing people like you and Professor Veight making sure everything’s okay?”

“I don’t know if I’m all that impressive, but I will admit Veight’s achievements are numerous. His presence here is definitely a big factor, since he understands both humans and demons. Plus, he knows how to negotiate in ways that both sides profit. He’s a great man for sure.” Woroy’s lips curled up into a grin. “And if anyone gets in his way, he can use his overwhelming might to beat them to a pulp. Man, he’s scary when he’s fighting for real.”

“I-Is he really?”

“Oh yeah. I fought him back in Rolmund, so I know. Even with hundreds of my best knights, I wasn’t a match for him. He’s not the kind of guy humans can beat. On top of that, he’s brave and reckless.”

“Yikes.”

Myurei shrunk back a little, and Woroy chuckled.

“He knows when to be merciful and when to be ruthless—that’s how he’s been able to win so many people over. When you boil it down, the Black Werewolf King is just really good at using the carrot-and-stick strategy. But it only works because he has no ambitions of his own, and his ideals are all pure. As long as Veight’s around, humans and demons should be able to get along.”

“I knew it! It really is all thanks to Professor Veight!”

Smiling, Woroy shook his head. “Only when it comes to human-demon relationships. It’s up to bishops and viceroys and people like us to make sure people with different backgrounds don’t get at each other’s throats.”

“I-I see.”

“Also, while Veight may be a great man, he won’t be around forever. Eventually, someone is going to have to step up to inherit his place. The same holds true for all the viceroys currently active right now.”

Myurei finally realized what Woroy was getting at.

“Y-You mean me?” he stuttered.

“Yep. Ryuunie, too. Unlike demons, humans put a lot of stock into bloodlines. Whether you like it or not, you’re going to be one the leaders of the next generation, Myurei, so you need to grow into someone who can lead us to a better future.”

“I’m going to shape...the future of Meraldia?”

“Course you are. The reason I keep inviting you here is because I know you have the potential to be one of the brightest stars of the next generation. I wouldn’t waste my time with incompetent fools when I’m this busy. If I thought you didn’t have it in you, I’d only bother inviting you to the city’s opening ceremony.”

Indeed, it was Woroy who had pushed for Ryuunie to regularly

invite Myurei to his city.

A mixture of surprise and excitement spread across Myurei's face as he realized that. "Y-You really think I'm that amazing!?"

"Yeah. But you've got a tough road ahead of you. Guys like us don't have powerful fangs or esoteric magic we can rely on. We don't have the Black Werewolf King's foresight or courage, either. So you're gonna have to work hard to find something that can make up for all that."

"I-I will! I'll work really hard!" Myurei stood ramrod straight, and Woroy gave him a slight bow.

"I hope you continue to be good friends with my nephew. He's a lot happier when you're around."

"Huh?"

Just then, Ryuunie called out to Myurei from behind, "Ah, Myurei! Sorry I left you alone! They finally let me go! Listen to this, I got them to adopt a three-shift schedule starting— Huh? What's wrong, Myurei?"

Ryuunie gave Myurei a questioning look, but Myurei kept his gaze fixed firmly on Woroy. Slowly but resolutely, the young boy nodded to the exiled prince.

— *From Woroy, to Myurei*

Some time later, in Lotz.

"Hey, gramps."

"Call me by my title when I'm in my office, ya brat," Petore barked. He took off his reading glasses and peered at Myurei. "So, whaddaya want?"

With an unhappy expression, Myurei held out copies of some of Lotz's official documents.

"Gramps, you're ripping our merchants off. How can you charge them this much in harbor fees?"

"Hmph. Lotz pays for the building and maintenance of all of these harbors. If we don't charge at least this much, we'd be operating at a loss."

Myurei looked unconvinced.

"Even so, if we charge this much, our exports in Kuwol will end up being priced higher," the young boy replied. "The merchants will try to offload the costs onto Kuwolese consumers"

"And how's that our problem, huh?"

"It'll give Wa a chance to undercut us by pricing their goods cheaper. We both have a few specialty products, but a lot of our exports overlap!"

Frowning, Petore put his glasses back on. Myurei was being surprisingly persistent today.

“Alright, what do ya think we should set our harbor fees at, then?”

“Why don’t we just charge a yearly fee to all the ship owners, and abolish the tax on export profits?”

“Ye’ve gotta be joshing me.”

Petore was floored. If they did that, they would lose a ton of money. Ship owners could only pay so much.

However, Myurei shrugged his shoulders and said, “If we make it a fixed yearly fee, we won’t have to spend money on hiring tax collectors or appraisers. That’ll speed up bureaucracy and increase throughput on all our ports.”

“True, we won’t hafta pay as many people, but...” Petore did a few quick calculations on his abacus. “Nope, we’d still lose a ton of money. Give me a better idea.”

“Wait, I really think this is our best bet. Hear me out, gramps.” Myurei pointed to the map of Meraldia hanging from Petore’s wall. “The age of individual cities is gone. We’re in the Commonwealth era now. If we have a standardized yearly fee that’s cheaper than every other place’s, then all of Meraldia’s merchants will use Lotz as their home port.”

“Ya got that right. Since they’ll get to use it as much as they want for a fixed price. Which means we’ll lose a ton of money,” Petore grumbled.

Smiling, Myurei smacked the map with the back of his hand. “Yeah, but won’t that help the seventeen cities as a whole? We’ll sell so many more goods, and bring in a bunch more foreign currency. The profits will be a lot higher than if all those merchants sold domestically.”

“Uh-huh.”

“If that happens, all the other cities will have more money to spend on producing higher quality luxury goods, which means they’ll bring way more of their stuff to our ports. All of Meraldia will benefit, and in the long run, Lotz is going to prosper from the massive increase in traffic!”

“Hmmm...”

Petore took his glasses off again and scrutinized his grandson’s face.



“And ya came up with that idea?”

“Of course. Pretty good, right?” Myurei puffed his chest out proudly.

Sighing, Petore said bluntly, “Things won’t go the way ya think.”

“Huh? Why?”

“‘Cause if we do things this way, we’ll need to issue permits to captains who’ve paid. Issuing permits takes money, making sure no one’s printing forgeries takes money, hiring people to check permits takes money, and updating permits and retiring expired ones takes money. It also puts the burden of responsibility onto the ship owners, and they ain’t gonna like that. Yer plan isn’t as simple as it appears.”

“Oh, I see...” Myurei muttered, hanging his head. Petore jotted down a few things on the back of one of his outdated reports.

“There’s also a physical limit to how fast you can make harbor traffic. Managing a harbor’s a lot more complicated than ya think. But, well, it was a good idea for a kid.” He looked up and saw that his grandson looked seriously depressed. Shrugging his shoulders, he cracked his neck and said, “But it looks like ya finally learned to use yer head, at least. Yer a good deal better at this than yer dad.”

“Stop insulting dad, gramps.”

“Hmph.”

Petore would never forgive Myurei’s dad for stealing his cute daughter’s heart. Deep inside, though, he was proud of his grandson’s growth.

“Gramps, you’re grinning.”

“Ahh, shut up, ya brat. Come back when yer smart enough to actually give me a good idea.”

“Screw you! I’m still right about it being the era of the Commonwealth now. You have to stop thinking about just Lotz and look at all of Meraldia as a whole.”

With that parting remark, Myurei ran out of his grandfather’s office. Petore folded his arms and grumbled, “Good grief.”

— *From Myurei, to Petore*

A few days later, Petore paid a visit to Rynunheit.

“What brings you here all of a sudden, Petore? Did something serious happen?” Airia asked, surprised, as she welcomed the old viceroy. Petore looked uncharacteristically excited.

“Nah, it’s nothing major. I was just thinking about changing up my harbor fees. Right now we have every ship owner pay a tax based on their profits, but what do ya think of making the viceroys pay harbor fees?”

“You want the viceroys paying for harbor upkeep?”

Petore took out a thick sheaf of documents and handed them to Airia.

“Yep. Ya can take it from yer merchants as a tax if ya want. I don’t mind how each city handles the specifics. But this way, we can cut down on a lotta hassle and make our harbor cheaper to use for everyone. The details are all in there.”

“I see...”

Airia flipped through the documents, skimming over the core points. She looked at the numbers Petore had written down, then did some quick math of her own. Making it a fixed fee would definitely lower the overall cost for Ryunheit’s merchants. It wasn’t a bad proposal by any means, but Airia couldn’t fathom where Petore had come up with it.

“I’m afraid I can’t decide on my own authority, so for now I’ll go over these documents at length. After that, we can discuss your proposal at a council meeting.”

“Sounds good to me. Whew, now I won’t hafta feel bad about shooting that brat down.”

What is he so happy about? Airia thought to herself.

“Is there some sort of story behind this proposal, Petore?”

The moment Airia asked that, Petore started gushing about his grandson, “About that. My cheeky grandson Myurei came to me with all these crazy ideas. He talked my damn ear off about it, actually.”

“You mean to say this is Myurei’s proposal?”

“Heh, yeah, ya could say that. He didn’t have the details ironed out, so I fixed it up a bit, but the idea’s his. Sheesh, it sure took a lotta effort to get it in working order.”

Petore happily massaged his shoulder. He was known for being an obstinate blockhead, but he was also famous for being a loving husband, father, and grandfather. Smiling, Airia carefully placed the documents on her shelf.

“It seems Myurei is growing up quite fast.”

“Hah, he’s still a little chick. If ya ask me, he’s letting all this praise get to his head. He even went and told me ‘the age of cities is over, gramps. It’s the Commonwealth era now.’ Can ya believe that?” Despite his complaining, there was a wide grin on Petore’s face. “I must be getting old if I’m being lectured by my own grandson.”

“Myurei’s one of the top students at Meraldia University. His friendly rivalry with Ryuunie has really helped him grow.”

“Yeah. I’m glad.” Petore nodded in satisfaction, then bowed deeply to Airia. “This is all thanks to you and Veight and everyone else from the demon army. I’m deeply grateful for all you’ve done for us. Thank you, truly, I am in your debt.”

“I really don’t think I’ve done all that much, but...” Airia smiled

gently at Petore. “It’s true that Meraldia is finally moving in a better direction. We have to do our best so our children can inherit a better nation.”

“Indeed, esteemed Demon Lord.” Petore smiled, then went back to his usual casual tone. “Now then, I think I’m gonna head back and see what I can learn about Kuwol’s situation. Damned brat left his newlywed wife to go off cavorting there, so the least I can do is get some updates for ya. By the way, if ya got a letter for Veight, I can deliver it.”

“Huh? Oh, in that case, could you wait a moment? I’ll write one now.”

Airia hurriedly took her pen and ink bottle out of her drawer and grabbed a fresh piece of parchment.

— *From Petore, to Airia*

Far to the south, in the land of Kuwol, Monza returned to her house in Karfal and waved at Veight, who she spotted in the living room.

“Watcha doing, boss?”

“Oh, I just got a letter from Ryunheit. It came by express courier, so I thought it might be urgent, but...” Veight cocked his head to one side. “It seems like everything’s fine.”

“Hmmm.”

“It’s too casual to be something that needs to be delivered express, but if it’s some kind of cipher, I can’t crack it.” Veight cocked his head to the other side.

Monza slapped him on the shoulder and said, “I bet they just wanted to get it to you quick since you’re doing such a good job and all. Probably.”

“I’m not convinced, especially not when that’s coming from you.”

Confused, Veight raised his head. “Well, whatever. If there’s no problems back home, that’s a good thing. Everyone seems to be doing fine, and it looks like my students are working hard too.”

“Ahaha, sounds nice.”

“Which means I better work hard too, so I can get this dumb civil war over with and go home to see my kid being born.”

“Yeah, I wanna see, too!”

Smiling, Veight and Monza bumped their fists together.

— *From Airia, to Veight.*

Afterword

We've finally made it to the commemorative tenth afterword. Greetings, readers. I honestly can't believe I've made it to the tenth volume. I didn't think *Der Werwolf* would be such a beloved series. Thank you so much for supporting me until now, everyone.

This volume is one of those "there's a traitor hidden among your allies" scenarios that...happens surprisingly often in real life. In this case, Veight could just kill Zagar and move on, but his personality won't allow it. For better or worse, the idea of doing something that would result in civilian casualties is anathema to him. Friedensrichter told him his weakness was his inability to make cruel but necessary decisions as well, which is why I started thinking about what might happen if Veight was put in a situation where if he didn't make a cruel choice, things would only keep getting worse. It will all be resolved in one way or another by the next volume, though, so look forward to that.

Part of my writing philosophy is when you're writing a transported-to-another-world story, you should make the challenges characters face as realistic as possible. That's basically what I went for this time around, too. I was actually unsure if this was the kind of problem I wanted to present to my characters, but with how much experience Veight has now, I thought it was about time he faced a truly difficult dilemma.

By the way, the whole segment about morning sickness comes from personal experience. I'm a guy, so I have no idea what it's actually like to go through it, but Veight's reactions are exactly the same as mine were when my wife was pregnant. Pregnancy and childbirth (and child-rearing) are extremely taxing endeavors, and I have infinite respect for my wife for going through it all. I wasn't as helpful to my wife as I could have been, but hopefully Veight will succeed where I failed. Though, he's an awkward guy too, so it's hard to say he's going to be an ideal husband. Still, he'll probably manage better than me.

Now then, it's time for the acknowledgments. Thank you Nishi(E)da-sensei for your wonderful drawings. (I'm sorry the characters all ended up being burly dark-skinned men this time around.) I wanted to make sure Rolmund, Wa, and Kuwol all had their distinctive styles of dress and appearance, so I'm really glad that he

went the extra mile to differentiate everyone. I'd also like to thank my editor Lord Fusanon for his valuable guidance. When I was trying to think of what to write for the bonus stories, he gave me a bunch of ideas, which really helped. I can't count how many times he's saved my hide now.

Incidentally, I'm working on a new novel with him as my editor again. It's called *The Voyage Log of a Small-Time Captain*, and it's being updated on Narou as well. *Der Werwolf* is about Veight making his way up the ranks in an organization, so I wanted this new series to focus on a protagonist who grew bigger and bigger outside of one. Go, small-business owners! (I'm also a small-business owner, so I can understand his struggles.) There are a few fanservice-y connections between the world in this work and in *Der Werwolf*, so I definitely recommend it to Werwolf fans. I can't go into details since that's spoilers, but be sure to check it out. The *Der Werwolf* manga adaptation by Kosumi Yuuchi just released its third volume too, so give that a shot if you've got time as well. It really captures the gentle yet relentless side of Veight really well, I think. There's also some short stories in there written by me, so it's packed with content (sorry for the shilling.)

Now then, volume 11 will be the end of the main story. Will Veight be able to calm this maelstrom of malice before it consumes the nation whole? Will he even be able to make it safely back to Meraldia? Most important of all, will he finally be able to keep one of his promises with Airia and make it back in time for the birth? Find out next time, in the final volume of *Der Werwolf's* main story.

I hope we all meet again, then.



The Origins
manga is
now being
serialized
too, so check
that out if
you're
curious!



Congrats on the release of
Volume 10!



作画: 伊藤 伸
監修: 小島 秀雄
Kosami Yunchi

Bonus Short Story

The Shadow Don

The expressions of Kuwol's coastal nobles were grim as they sat down in the meeting room.

"So they're sending us Meraldia's Black Werewolf King..."

"I've heard that werewolves are a race of demons that live in Meraldia."

"Not only is he one of the most prominent generals in the demon army, but it's been said he's fought on the front lines on behalf of multiple Demon Lords."

"Supposedly, he's annihilated entire armies on his own multiple times, and every person he's dueled was felled with a single strike."

"I've also heard that he's a master of magic and possesses many skills Kuwol's greatest mages have never even heard of. They say he can even command armies of the dead."

"...His moniker appears well-deserved."

Most of Kuwol's nobles were able to get decently accurate information about Meraldia from the Meraldian viceroys they traded with. They gulped collectively as they realized what kind of person was about to land on their shores.

"The Black Werewolf King is undoubtedly Meraldia's greatest trump card. He's their most accomplished diplomat; their strongest warrior; and their shrewdest general."

"I suppose this means Meraldia is finally taking our plight seriously."

Of course, this was the development the coastal nobles had been hoping for. But the aid Meraldia was sending was so overwhelming they felt more trepidation than joy.

"What kind of person is Lord Veight, by your estimation?"

"Well..." Birakoya Bahza muttered, unsure of how to describe him. In the end, she opted to take a letter out of her pocket and read it aloud.

"He's a cordial and gentle man who prefers to avoid conflict. In truth, he is more of a merchant than a soldier, and more of a scholar than a merchant. He is a true sage who values culture and academics above all else."

"Lady Birakoya is that letter from that crusty old man...err, I mean Lord Petore?"

“It is. I can’t believe that stubborn geezer would hold anyone in such high regard, but judging by how coherent the letter is, I doubt he’s going senile.” Birakoya smiled faintly. “I suspect he’s the reason all of Meraldia’s viceroys surrendered to the demon army. Military might and financial incentives alone wouldn’t be enough to bring the northern and southern cities together.”

The other nobles nodded in agreement.

“That does sound plausible... You would need an exceptionally talented leader to unify all of Meraldia under a demon ruler.”

“I imagine this means we can trust him.”

Birakoya nodded and slipped the letter back into her pocket. “He shall be arriving at my port in a few days. I intend to hide my true identity during our initial meeting to see how he treats me.”

“Ahahaha... I see you’re as reckless as always, Lady Birakoya.”

The old nobles chuckled to each other. When she was young, Birakoya regularly got wrapped up in all sorts of mischief together with Meraldia’s two troublemakers, the White Shark, Petore, and the Black Whale, Grasco. It appeared age had done little to temper her unruly spirit.

Another one of the nobles asked, “What do you plan to do if he’s not as great a man as we’ve been led to believe?”

“In that case, I shall politely ask him to leave before he can make a mess of things. I’ll even give him a few gifts so he has no reason to complain.” Birakoya replied without hesitation. She chuckled and added, “But I doubt that will be necessary. I have faith in Petore’s judgment. Lord Veight must be more impressive than a Hero for that old coot to praise him so. I cannot wait to see him for myself!”

Birakoya grinned, and despite the wrinkles lining her face, she looked like an impetuous young teen.

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Characters

Map

The Story So Far

Chapter 10

Inherited Wills

Afterword

Bonus Short Story

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Copyright



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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 10
by Hyougetsu

Translated by Ningen
Edited by Meiru

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